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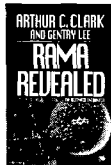
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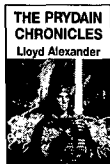
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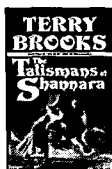
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Asimov's

SCIENCE FICTION

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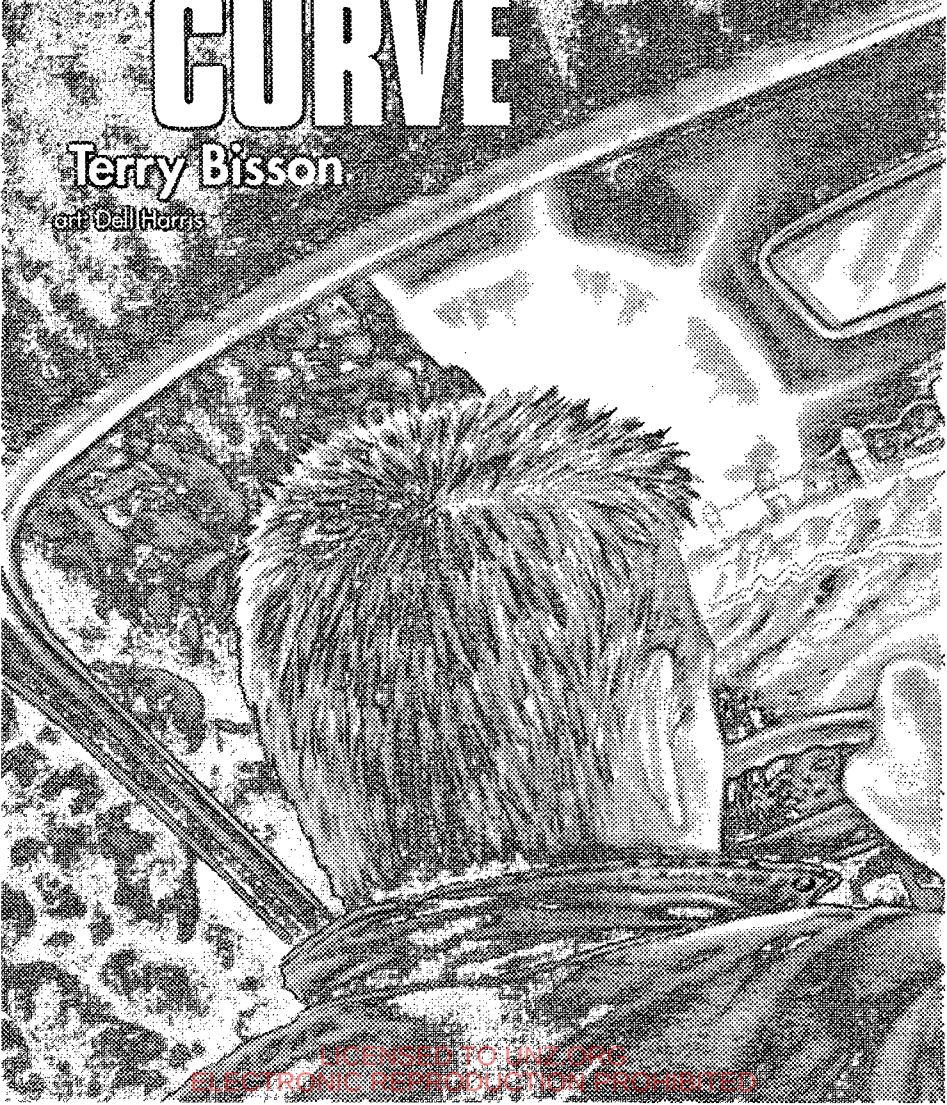
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DEAD MAN'S CURVE

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"You're not going to believe what I'm going to tell you," Hal said.

"Probably not."

"But I'm going to tell you anyway."

"Probably are."

"There is another world."

"Probably is."

"Camilla, quit acting silly. If you could see me over the phone, you'd know that I was serious. Another world! Besides this one."

"Like Lechuguilla," I said. "Like the Ruwenzori."

"No. Really different."

"Like the Moon?"

"The Moon is part of this world. I'm talking about something much, much more amazing. Get your clothes on, I'm coming over."

"The Moon is *not* part of this world. And I don't walk around the apartment with no clothes on. And I'm watching *Unsolved Mysteries*, so don't come over until nine unless you can keep your mouth shut."

Hal was my best friend, is my best friend, all the way from grade school, on and off. We were the only ones from our class, eleven years after graduation, who weren't married. The only halfway normal ones, anyway.

Hal went to Bluegrass Community College in Frankfort, and sold dope. I worked at the KwikPik and watched *Unsolved Mysteries*.

Joke.

Hal didn't arrive until 9:07. I was sitting on the front steps of the Belle Meade Arms, smoking a cigarette, waiting for him. My last boyfriend wouldn't let me smoke in the apartment, and I kept the prohibition (along with the apartment) after I got rid of him. It was a warm July night and I could hear Hal's '85 Cavalier a block away. The transmission had a whine. It's probably the worst car ever made and I ought to know; my last boyfriend worked for a Chevy dealer.

But enough about him.

"*There is another world*," I said, trying to sound mysterious like Robert Stack on *Unsolved Mysteries*.

"Once you see it you won't laugh," Hal said.

"Patagonia?" I said. "Tibesti? Machu Picchu?" We knew all the neat places. As kids we had shared stacks of *National Geographics*. I was looking for Oz. Hal was looking for where his father had gone. We never found either.

"Not the Moon. Not Lechuguilla. Not Machu Picchu. This is really different."

"Where did you read about it?"

"I didn't read about it. I found it. I've *been there*. This is serious, Camilla. I'm the only one who knows about it. It's not even like a real place. It's another world."

"I thought you said it was real."

"Come on. Get in the car. We're going for a ride."

We drove out Old 19 to Dead Man's Curve. It's a long hairpin near the top of Caddy's Bluff, over the Kentucky River. Nobody gets killed on it anymore. In the old days, before the interstate, they say people made a living stripping parts off the wrecks at the bottom of the bluff. The ones that didn't go into the river.

"I never come here that I don't think of Wascomb," I said. In high school, Johnny Wascomb had taken Dead Man's Curve at fifty-nine mph. It was still the record as far as I knew. Ironically, he didn't get killed driving but in an accident in the Navy. He was the only dead person I knew.

"Funny you should mention Wascomb," Hal said. "I was seeing if I could take the curve as fast as him when it happened."

"When what happened?"

"You'll see." Hal drove up the bluff, around the curve, and turned into an old logging road. It was dark back in the trees.

"Is this a Stephen King thing?" I asked, alarmed.

"No, Camilla. I'm just turning around." Hal backed out onto the highway and started down the hill, around the curve. Going down, we were on the outside; that's what made it Dead Man's Curve.

"I drive home from Frankfort this way twice a week. As an experiment, I started taking the curve at forty, forty-two, forty-four. In two mph increments. The way Wascomb did."

"I never knew he did it that way."

"He was very scientific."

"He went fifty-nine in his GTO," I said. "Not some dinky Cavalier."

"I'm not even going to go fifty," Hal said. "Watch what happened to me at forty-two."

Hal set the Cavalier on forty-two as we went into the curve. From where I was sitting it looked like thirty-nine. The white guard posts along the road flickered past, low in the headlights. The curve tightened slowly but Hal kept his speed up. A third of the way around, the big trees gave out and I knew we were over the cliff.

The tires squealed but only a little. The posts flickered past one by one by me. They were all the same distance apart, and we were at a steady speed, so it looked like nothing was moving. The cable that connected the posts undulated in the headlights like a white wave; then the wave seemed to open, and suddenly the world turned inside out like a sock, and we were in a room.

Not in the car. A white room. We were sitting on a sort of bench, side by side. I sensed Hal beside me on my right but I didn't see him until he stood up.

He stood up and I stood up with him. He turned and I turned with him. In front of us was a wall. No, it was a window. Beyond it I could see endless rows of hills, white, but dark, like snow in moonlight. Then Hal turned again and I turned with him. Another wall. I wanted to see through it but Hal stepped back. We stepped back. I saw stars and the white room was gone. What I had thought was stars was leaves in the headlights, across the road. Through the windshield. The world had turned inside out again, or outside in, and we were back in the car, stopped at the bottom of the hill where Old 19 connects with River Road. I recognized the stop sign with the bullet holes.

Hal was on my left again, not my right. He was looking at me. "Well?" he said.

"Well?! What the hell was that?" I said.

"You saw it too, right?"

"Saw it? I was there. We were there!"

"Where?" Hal was suddenly like a lawyer or a cop, interrogative. "What was it? What was it for you?"

"A—white room. Like a waiting room."

"Then it's real," he said, putting the Cavalier into gear and turning onto River Road back toward town. "I had to know if it was real. I almost wish to hell you hadn't seen it too. Now I don't know what to do."

Two

The next day Hal picked me up at the KwikPik after work. He was twenty minutes late. I sat out front and waited for him.

"Sorry I'm late, Camilla," he said. "I wanted to tell my professor about it."

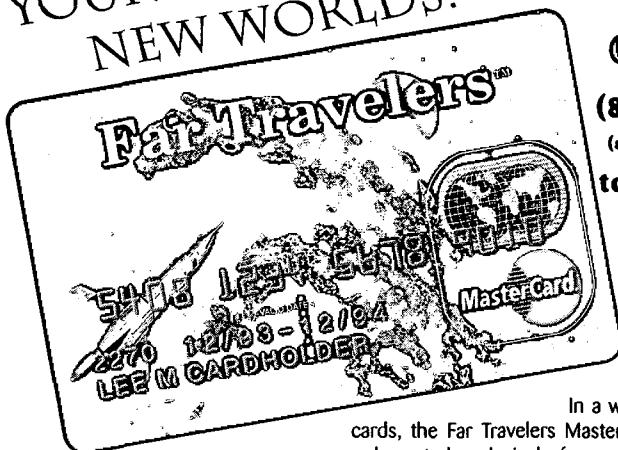
We both knew what *it* was. "What did he say?"

"He didn't have time to talk about it. He had to run out. He has two jobs. He said it might have something to do with the white posts flickering in the headlights. Hell, I had already figured that out. My theory is, they set up a resonance and open a portal into another universe."

Hal reads science fiction. I never could get into it.

We headed out Old 19. "I tried it faster and slower," Hal said. "I tried it with the radio on and in low range, etcetera. It only works at forty-two, only in this Cavalier, and only at night. Last night was my third time. I had to take you with me to be sure I wasn't hallucinating or something."

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Hal pulled into the logging road. "Wait," I said. "How do we know for sure we can always get back?"

"One wall leads back. You step back into it. It's the easiest part. It breaks the spell or something."

"Spell. That's not very scientific. What if we get trapped?"

"You've been trapped in this world all your life, Camilla."

"It's not the same and you know it. It's bigger, for one thing."

"You want to chicken out?" he asked.

"Do you?" There it was; we both grinned. How could we? How often do you get a chance to go to another world?

Hal backed out onto the highway and started down the bluff.

"Should I fasten my seat belt?"

"Gee, I don't know, Camilla. I never thought about it."

I fastened my seat belt.

Thirty-seven. Forty. Forty-two (which looked like thirty-nine). The tires were squealing just barely. The transmission whined. "How do we know this speedometer's accurate?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter. Haven't you ever heard of relativity? Just sit tight. Look straight ahead."

I kept my eye on the hood ornament, a little chrome cavalier in tights with a plume on his hat. Little buns like raisins. The white posts started flickering in that wave motion, the cable started undulating, and this time I saw the wave turn the world inside out, like a sock. And there we were, in the white room.

It was easier than walking into a movie theatre. Or out of one. Nothing was there unless I looked at it directly. Then it sort of drew itself in. I looked down and saw the bench, white. The floor, white. I looked at my hands and my feet. I looked like a video character or a cartoon. I was flat and I only existed when I moved. When I held my hand still it was gone. But when I moved it or looked at it hard, it was there.

I tried running my tongue around the inside of my mouth. There was nothing there. No spit. No teeth.

But I could talk. I looked at Hal and said, "Here we are." I couldn't tell where the words came from. Hal said the same words back: "Here we are."

I wanted to stand up. Suddenly I was standing and Hal was standing beside me. It was easy, like a piece of paper unfolding. It was all beginning to seem normal.

"Let's look around," I said. "Okay," Hal said.

The light was like the light in the KwikPik. The longer I looked at things, the more normal they became. But never "normal" normal. The white room was not really white. I could see through the wall to the hills, arranged in endless rows.

"See those hills," I said.

"I think they are clouds," Hal said. I looked at him and suddenly I felt scared. You never look directly at people in dreams. I had been hoping this would turn out to be some kind of dream. But it wasn't.

"Here we are," Hal said again. He reached out and touched the bench behind us. I touched it at the same time. I was doing what he did now. The bench felt normal. But not "normal" normal.

"Time to go back," Hal said.

"Not yet," I said. I turned and he turned with me. It seemed that one of us decided what to do for us both, and now it was me again.

We were facing another white wall. Now that I was looking at it, I could see through it. There were endless rooms, like in a mirror. Only they never got smaller. All the rooms were empty except the first one.

"There's a person there," Hal said.

The person in the other room turned toward us.

I felt myself stumble backward, even though I couldn't move. We must have fallen through the wall because we were at the stop sign, in the car. Bullet holes, seat belt and all.

"How'd we get here?" I asked.

"I stepped back," Hal said. "I must have panicked."

"You should have waited till I was ready!"

"Camilla, what are we arguing about!? Did you see what I saw? Did you?"

"Of course. But don't talk about it. No theories. Let's just go back."

"Tomorrow night."

"No. Tonight. Right now."

We turned around and drove to the top of the hill, and went around Dead Man's Curve again. It was like stepping back into (or out of) the theater. It was getting easy. This time I stood and Hal stood with me, and I turned toward the wall (it was on our right) and there he was, right where we had left him, looking through from the other room.

"Wascomb?" Hal whispered.

Three

"Harold," Wascomb said. It wasn't a question or a greeting. He didn't seem surprised to see us.

"Camilla is here too," Hal said.

"Camilla who?"

"A friend—"

"Forget it," I said. I had sat next to him in two classes. He had dated my cousin, Ruth Ann, all through senior year.

"Where are you?" Wascomb asked. Like Hal, like myself, he was only there if I looked at him hard. There were no details. But when he talked I could hear his voice in my head like a memory.

"We're here where you are," Hal said. "Wherever this is. Where are we?"

"I don't know. I'm dead."

"I know. I'm sorry," Hal said.

"I don't remember how I died. Am I supposed to remember?"

"It was a steam explosion," Hal said.

"You were in the Navy," I said. "You lost your life on the flight deck of the carrier *Kitty Hawk*."

"You're Ruth Ann's cousin," Wascomb said. "Tamara. I always thought you were cute."

"Camilla." But I forgave him everything. Wascomb didn't have many details. Just enough to talk to. But he seemed more solid than Hal or I. I had the feeling that if I reached out, I could touch him through the wall.

I didn't want to reach out.

"Are you all dead?"

"No," Hal said. "We're just—visiting. We came in a car. Sort of."

"I know. Dead Man's Curve. I discovered it when I was a teenager," Wascomb said. "You go around at a certain speed, at night, and you end up here. You're the only ones since me. I've been here forever. Are you all still teenagers?"

"At heart," I said.

"I'm in Community College," Hal said.

"Be glad you're not dead. It's all over then."

"But it's not!" I said. "You were dead, but here you are."

"I'm still dead," said Wascomb. "It's still all over."

"But it means there is life after death!" I said.

"Sort of." Wascomb said. "It doesn't amount to much. It's just for people who go around the curve at the certain speed, in a certain car maybe. I think the posts in the headlights set up a wave pattern that flips you through into another universe. I studied electronics in the Navy."

"What was your speed?" Hal asked.

"Fifty-one," said Wascomb. "In my GTO. I wanted to bring Ruth Ann. But I had sold my GTO. It was a classic already, even then. How long's it been?"

"Ten years."

"Think what it would be worth now. Does Ruth Ann know I'm dead?"

"It's been ten years," Hal said. "She's happily married."

"How would you know that?" I said. Actually, Ruth Ann was getting a divorce but I didn't see any point in going into it.

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"I never should have sold that GTO," Wascomb said. "It wouldn't work in any other car. How'd you make it work?"

"A Cavalier," Hal said.

"Cavalier?"

"It's kind of a Chevy."

"Is it any good?"

"I can't believe you're dead and still talking about cars," I said.

"Actually, I don't talk about anything usually. It's not much different from being dead. A little better, I guess. I never thought I'd come back here, when I died I mean. What did you say it was?"

"Steam explosion," I said. "*The Kitty Hawk*. You were in the Mediterranean."

"What's the Mediterranean?"

"It's time for us to go," Hal said. "It was—nice seeing you."

"See, you're not dead. You can go back but I can't. I'll be here forever, I guess. Will you come back and see me?"

"Sure," I said. I was just humoring him. Like Hal, I was ready to go.

"And bring Ruth Ann."

"What?" We both turned back around.

"She's married, Wascomb," I said.

"I thought you said she was getting a divorce."

"Did I say that?"

"I think you started to."

"She thinks you're dead, Wascomb."

"I am dead. That's why I want to see her. I never get to see anybody."

Four

Ruth Ann was surprised to see me at her door the next day. "How about asking me in?" I said. I should explain that I have short hair and wear a motorcycle jacket. Ruth Ann is the opposite type.

Still, I was her cousin and she had to ask me in. Blood's thicker than water. She brought me a canned iced tea and set it on the table.

"Is this about Aunt Betty?" she asked. My mother, her aunt, is sort of a drunk.

I had rehearsed how to tell the story, even going over it out loud in the car, but I could see now that it wasn't going to work. It was too bizarre.

"No, it's about Wascomb, but I can't tell you here," I said. "I came by to see if we could—go for a drive."

"Johnny Wascomb? Camilla, are you smoking something?"

I was smoking a cigarette but I put it out. "It's about Wascomb, and it concerns you," I said. "It's about a—message from him to you."

Her face went white. "A letter?"

"A message," I said. "Not a letter."

She looked relieved. "You know he used to write me from the Navy. I never answered his letters. Johnny Wascomb. But what could it be about him? Never mind. Don't tell me. I will go with you."

"I talked to my professor," said Hal, when he met me at the KwikPik after work. "He thinks it's probably some kind of artificial universe created by the wave motion of the lights on the posts. Very rare."

"I should hope," I said. I couldn't imagine swapping worlds every time you went around a curve.

"He says the reason everything looks sketchy is that our brains are wired for this universe. Whatever they see, they have to make it a version of this one. No matter how different it is. Do you think Ruth Ann will show?"

At 9:06 Ruth Ann pulled up in her Volvo. She motioned me over to her window. "What's he doing here?"

"He's part of the deal," I said.

"I can't be seen with him. Isn't he some kind of a dope dealer?" Ervin, her husband, was a state senator. (Not *the* state senator, *a* state senator.)

"Was," I lied. "Besides, I thought you were getting a divorce. Anyway, you have to come. I promised."

"Promised who?"

"Don't make me say it. It'll sound too crazy. Get in the front seat. I'll get in the back."

We got into the Cavalier. "Long time no see," Hal said. "Guess we run in different circles."

"I wouldn't know, I don't run in circles," said Ruth Ann. I had forgotten how obnoxious she could be.

Hal drove out Old 19, toward Dead Man's Curve. I felt like I should prepare Ruth Ann but I didn't know where to start. She didn't give me time to figure it out. "Camilla, tell me what's going on," she said as we were heading up the bluff. "Right now or I'm getting out of the car." I had forgotten how bossy she could be.

Hal turned into the old logging road at the top of the bluff. "Last night we talked to Wascomb," I said. "I know it sounds weird."

"Is this some kind of Stephen King thing?" Ruth Ann said. "If it is, I'm getting out of the car right now!"

Hal leaned over and opened her door. "Be my guest! Camilla, I'm warning you, she's going to mess up everything."

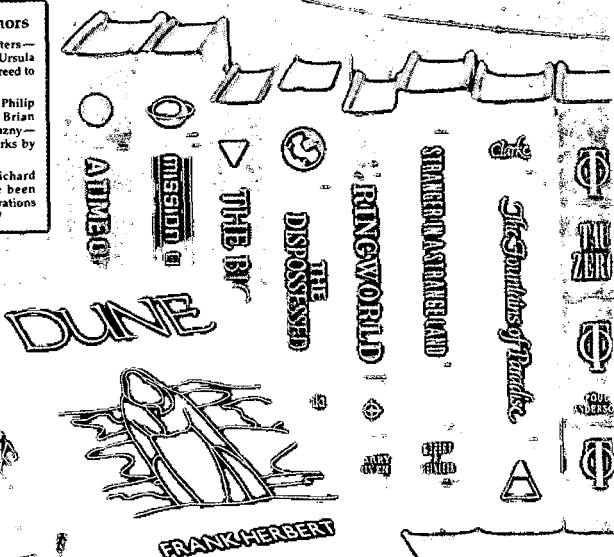
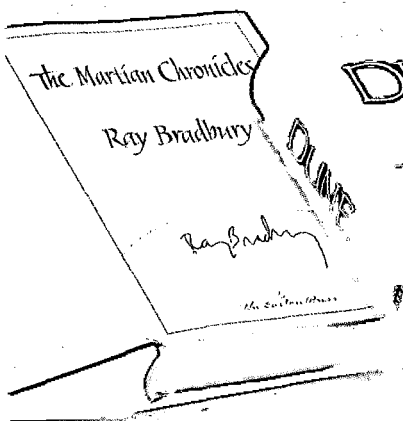
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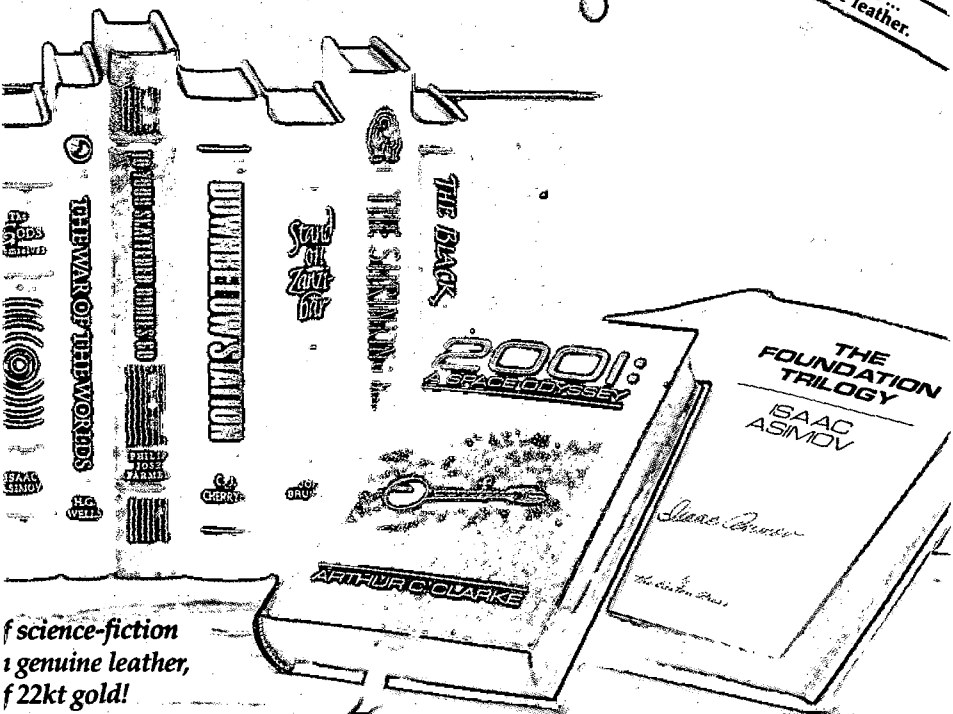
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"No!" I leaned up over the seat and shut her door. "It's not a Stephen King thing," I said. "It's—more like a love story."

That shut her up. Hal backed out and turned around.

"True love," I said. "The kind where love conquereth death."

"Conquereth?" Hal was staring at me in the rear-view mirror. I realized I had gone a little too far. "Put your seat belt on," I said.

Hal drove down the hill at thirty, thirty-five. Ruth Ann started up again. "Dead Man's Curve? Are you two trying to scare me?"

"Ruth Ann—"

"If this is your idea of a thrill, it's totally pathetic," Ruth Ann said.

"Johnny Wascomb took this curve at seventy-five, lots of times."

"Ruth Ann, shut up," I said. "Just watch the hood ornament. The little cavalier."

"It was fifty-nine," said Hal. Muttered Hal.

Forty-two. There was the wave, the undulating stream of white posts, and the world turned inside out like a sock, and there we were, in the white room. I would have breathed a sigh of relief except I wasn't breathing. If this wouldn't shut her up, nothing would.

"Where are we?" Ruth Ann asked.

"It's another world," Hal said.

"Is this some weird Navy thing? Were they lying about the accident?" To shut her up, I stood and pulled her and Hal with me. I knew they would stand when I did. Through the wall we saw the endless ranges of hills.

"Who owns all this?" Ruth Ann asked.

I turned and, again, they turned with me. We faced the other wall and the endless rooms. Wascomb was standing there as if he had been waiting for us.

"Omigod," said Ruth Ann. "Johnny. Is it really you?"

"Not exactly. I'm dead. Who are you?"

"It's me!"

"You told us to bring her," I said.

"Who told who what?"

"You told us to bring her," Hal said. "Don't you remember?"

"I told you, I'm dead," Wascomb said. "It's hard for me to remember things. It's not hard exactly. I just don't do it."

"Do you want us to leave?" Hal asked. I could tell he was hoping. "We can take her back with us."

"Back where?"

"Johnny, stop it!" screamed Ruth Ann. Her scream shook the whole universe.

"Ruth Ann?" said Wascomb. "I wanted to bring you here but I sold my

GTO. You got mad because I showed the guys your bra in the glove compartment. I can't believe I sold that car."

"Johnny, are you really dead? The casket was closed at the funeral. I'm sorry I didn't answer your letters."

"What letters?"

"You sent me one a day for weeks. Or was it one a week for months? Don't you remember?"

"I can remember how to unhook your bra with one hand. But I can't remember *you*. All I remember is being dead. Once you're here, you've been here forever. Once you're dead you're always dead, forward and back. I think."

"Let's get out of here," Hal said. I had to agree. He and I both turned back toward the other wall. Ruth Ann turned with us. The sky was dark and yet bright, like a negative. The hills were white, but dark.

"What happened to Johnny?" Ruth Ann asked.

"I don't know," I lied. I looked at Hal beside me and he leaned back toward the bench, but it was a wall, and we slipped through it into a darkness that turned out to be leaves, and trees, and we were stopped again at the stop sign. Bullet holes and all.

"Take me home," said Ruth Ann. I couldn't tell if she was mad or what, the way she was blubbering. "Right this minute!"

Five

The next day was Sunday, the day I work twelve hours straight. When I got to the KwikPik at 7:00 a.m., Hal was there, looking worried.

"I told you she was crazy," Hal said. "What do you think she'll do?"

"Ruth Ann? She won't do anything."

"Are you kidding? She was sobbing all the way home, then like a zombie when she went into the house. You don't think that husband of hers will notice? He could get me kicked out of school."

"They're getting a divorce anyway," I said. "And how can you get kicked out of school when you're only taking one class?"

"Two."

I could see he was irrational, so I changed the subject. "Speaking of school, did you talk to your professor?"

"Yes, I told you, he says it's probably a pocket universe. They twist off the main universe, like bubbles."

"The main universe?"

"He's calling in sick on his other job so he can come with us tonight."

"Tonight?"

"He's afraid to wait. He's afraid it might disappear or something. He wants to check it out first-hand. I might get extra credit."

"What does this guy teach? I thought you were studying business."

"His course is called Non-Spatial Strategies. It's a marketing course. He just throws in a little physics, because that was his minor. He wants to make a video."

"Don't turn around," I said.

Ruth Ann had just driven up, or rather her husband had driven her up, in their new Volvo 740 Turbo with Intercooler. Whatever that is. "Ruth Ann's getting out of the car," I said. "From the way she's dressed, they're on their way to church. She's coming in the door."

"Camilla," she said. "And you. Are you everywhere? I told Ervin I was just coming in to get some cigarettes." She burst into tears.

"Good lord, Ruth Ann," I said. "What's the matter?" Ervin waved from the car and I waved back. He's a state senator. They wave at everybody.

"The matter? Do you realize I spoke to my only true love last night? I found him in the land where love never dies."

"Ruth Ann, you're talking like a song on the radio," I said. It wasn't intended as a compliment.

"It's just a pocket universe," Hal said.

"There just *happens* to be a guy in it who just *happens* to be my first love."

"You dumped him, remember?" I said. "Besides, Ruth Ann, he's dead."

Ruth Ann burst into tears again. This time she dropped her money all over the floor. Hal bent down to pick it up. Always the gentleman. "I told you she was crazy," he said. Muttered.

"Is he talking about me? Camilla, I can't let Ervin see me crying. Act like we're laughing. Let him see you smile. Good."

All the time she was ordering me around, she was crying. Hal handed her her money and she said, "Now, tell me, when are we going back? Tonight?"

"We're not going back," Hal said. "It's been declared off-limits. By the Navy."

"Let me handle this, Hal," I said. He left, not bothering to speak to Ervin. They lived in two different worlds. Ruth Ann lit a cigarette.

"You can't smoke in the store," I said. She ignored me.

"Camilla, where is Johnny? How do I get back there?"

I explained the pocket universe theory, as best I could. "It's some sort of artificial universe," I said. "Apparently if you have ever been there, you are always there; or you go back there after you are dead. Or something. Wascomb's the only one there. It's his universe, I guess."

"Does that mean we'll go back there after we're dead?"

"I don't know," I said. I hoped not. "You get there by going around Dead Man's Curve."

"No, you don't, I tried it," she said. "I tried every different speed in the Volvo last night."

"After we dropped you off?"

"Of course. I went back. I wanted to be alone with Johnny. I tried both directions. Up, down."

"It only works in certain cars," I said. "It has to do with the lights, and maybe the sound. Hal's Cavalier has a bad transmission whine. I don't remember Wascomb's GTO."

"I do," said Ruth Ann. "I never told anybody this, Camilla, but I lost my virginity in that car."

I didn't know what to say. It wasn't such a big secret. Those Wascomb hadn't told, had figured it out on their own.

"Would Hal loan me his Cavalier? I could buy it from him. I have my own money."

"Ruth Ann, this is crazy."

"Camilla, did you ever dump somebody and then want them back? Well, answer me. Did you ever think you would give anything to—"

"Ruth Ann, Wascomb is dead."

"Camilla, are you trying to make me scream? If you think I won't scream because I'm in a store—"

"All right, all right," I said. "Hal is picking me up after work at eight. Be here and I'll work it out somehow."

Six

"What's she doing here?" Hal asked.

"That's the professor?" I asked him in turn. An enormous fat man in a Geo Metro had just pulled in behind the Cavalier. He looked familiar.

"Come over here, I'll introduce you. Professor (he said some name), this is my colleague, Camilla Perry."

"And that's my cousin Ruth Ann Embry in the Volvo," I said.

"She's not going with us," Hal said to the professor. "There's not room for four."

"Hal, she's as much a part of this as I am," I said. "It's Wascomb's universe, after all. He asked for her."

"Wascomb's universe?" That got him mad. "If it's Wascomb's universe, how come I own the only car that goes to it?"

Ruth Ann got out of the Volvo. She was wearing a denim jacket. I had to admit she looked good, whatever she wore.

"Not room for four?" the professor said. "Are you talking about the car,

or the universe? Theoretically, a pocket universe can hold any number of people. The problem is getting into it."

His problem was getting into the Cavalier. He looked into the back seat uncertainly. "Ruth Ann and I will get in the back," I said. He got in the front with Hal. We drove out of town on Old 19.

"Did Hal explain my pocket universe theory?" the professor said.

"Tell us again," Ruth Ann said.

"My theory is that they are accidental wave forms, generated by aural and visual interference patterns and pinched off like bubbles from this universe. About the size of a basketball."

"Now I know where I've seen you," I said. "Didn't you used to manage the driving range out on Oldham Road?"

"Still do."

My last boyfriend was a golf nut. I still had his clubs under my bed. But enough about him. "If it's the size of a baseball, how are we all going to fit in it?" Ruth Ann asked.

"Basketball," the professor said. "And that's just from the outside. On the inside, it can be as big as it needs to be. Our universe is about the size of a basketball too, from the outside. If we could get outside it to take a look at it. The problem is getting outside one universe without immediately getting into another one. Do you follow me?"

"No."

"According to the professor, everything's about the size of a basketball," Hal said.

That makes him the biggest thing in creation, I thought.

We were heading up the bluff. "Why are you putting on lipstick?" I whispered to Ruth Ann. "And why are you filming her?" I asked the professor.

"Videotaping," the professor said. "This is a scientific experiment. I have to document everything." He was turned around in his seat with his camcorder on his shoulder. Ruth Ann was combing her hair. Hal pulled into the logging road to turn around. It was dark back in the trees.

"Why are we stopping?" the professor asked. "Is this some kind of Stephen King thing?"

"I'm beginning to think so," Hal said. Muttered. I could tell he was angry that Ruth Ann was along.

"Here we go," Hal said. The professor turned around and started videotaping through the windshield. We started down the bluff, around Dead Man's Curve at forty-two. The posts started flickering past. Ruth Ann started to fool with the buttons on her denim jacket. The wave started flickering, and the world turned inside out like a sock, and there we were. In the white room.

"Where's the professor?" I wondered. I stood. Hal and Ruth Ann stood with me. There were only the three of us.

"Maybe he couldn't fit through," Ruth Ann said.

I wanted to look out the window at the hills but I was turning instead, toward the other room. Ruth Ann was turning us with her. Wascomb waited exactly as we had left him.

"Mother?" he asked.

"Ruth Ann," Ruth Ann said. "Don't you remember me? Never mind. I came to take you back."

"Back where?"

"There is another world," Hal said. "The real world."

"Hal," I said. "He's dead. Why rub it in?"

"You both stay out of this!" Ruth Ann said.

"What's so real about it?" Wascomb asked. "Are you guys in the Navy?"

"Johnny, I brought you something," Ruth Ann said. "Two friends of yours."

I thought she meant Hal and me. Then I realized she had finished unbuttoning her jacket. I tried to see her body but there was nothing there. When I stared long enough it sketched itself in, but it was too vague.

"Remember them?" she said again. "You used to call them Ben and Jerry."

"Ruth Ann!" I said.

"Ruth Ann, I've been dead for a long time," Wascomb said.

"I'll make you remember me," Ruth Ann said. She stepped forward, toward the other room—as one person Hal and I both pulled back, alarmed. We fell through into darkness.

"Hooonnnnk! Hoooonnnnk!"

A car sped by, barely missing the front of the Cavalier, which was sticking out past the stop sign onto River Road. "What happened?" Ruth Ann asked. She was buttoning her denim jacket. The professor was leaning over the back of the seat, videotaping her every move.

"What happened was, you almost got us killed!" Hal said. Yelled. Screamed.

We took Ruth Ann back to the KwikPik to get her Volvo. She got out of the car without a word. I offered to drive her home but she just shook her head and drove off.

"What happened to you?" Hal asked the professor.

"I didn't go through," he said. "But I got what I wanted. I have it documented."

We went to Hal's and played the tape on his VCR. It showed Ruth Ann putting on her lipstick. It showed Hal driving and looking annoyed. Then

there were the posts in the headlights, flickering past. There was another shot of Hal driving. Then of me and Ruth Ann in the back seat. Ruth Ann was unbuttoning her denim jacket. She wasn't wearing anything underneath it, not even a bra. The camera zoomed in on her breasts. The screen flickered, then showed the stop sign.

"Pretty average tits for a Homecoming Queen," Hal said.

"Knock it off," I said. "She may be a lunatic but she's my cousin. Anyway, I thought this was a scientific experiment."

"It was," the professor said. "And it worked." He rewound to where Ruth Ann unbuttoned her jacket. "Watch the numbers this time, at the bottom corner of the screen." The camera zoomed in on Ruth Ann's breasts again. The whole sequence lasted seven seconds. Three of them were blank.

8:04:26 (breasts)

8:04:27 (breasts)

8:04:28 (blank)

8:04:29 (blank)

8:04:30 (blank)

8:04:31 (breasts)

8:04:32 (breasts)

"She disappeared for three seconds," the professor said.

"That means we disappeared too," I said.

"I wasn't documenting that. The point is, she was gone and the video proves it, at least to me. It implies the existence of the pocket universe, at least indirectly. I'll need more documentation, though. The next problem is, how do I get through personally?"

"Just follow the bouncing boobs," Hal said.

"Knock it off, I said," I said. "You have to be watching the white wave. The posts. The little cavalier on the hood. That's what you should have been filming."

"Videotaping."

"Whatever. Anyway, how could it have only lasted three seconds? It sure felt like a lot longer than that."

"Haven't you ever heard of relativity?" Hal asked.

"Time in a pocket universe doesn't really connect with time here," the professor said. "The pocket universe could have just squeezed off a microsecond here, then divided it up into a million parts there, which would seem like twenty minutes to you. It's all subjective. That's why it seems like eternity to your friend in there, whereas it's probably only been only two or three minutes altogether. See what I mean?"

"No. You mean there's life after death but it only lasts a couple of minutes?"

"Tops. But it seems like eternity. Meanwhile, can we try again tomorrow night?"

I was game. So was Hal, as long as Ruth Ann didn't come along. I left Hal and the professor watching reruns of Ruth Ann's tits and walked home to watch *Unsolved Mysteries*. After, I sat outside and smoked a cigarette. I wondered if my last boyfriend was ever coming back. I wondered what Wascomb was doing. Probably the same thing I was. I decided one more trip would be enough for me.

Seven

I got off at 8:00 and Hal was waiting for me, in the lot of the KwikPik. At 8:04 the professor rolled in in his Geo Metro. At 8:05 guess who rolled in in her Volvo.

"No way!" said Hal from the back of the Cavalier. He sent me out to deal with her. He was taping a foam cradle for the camcorder to the shelf behind the back seat.

The professor began the process of getting out of the Geo Metro. Ruth Ann was already out of her Volvo. She was wearing her denim jacket again. Plus treader pants and eyeliner. I felt like arresting her.

"You're not going!" I said.

"Camilla, don't even try to stop me," she said. "Besides, you're supposed to be my cousin. Blood's thicker than water."

"Everything's thicker than water," I said.

"We'll see!" She stomped off and helped the professor out of his car, bending over, probably to let him know what she was wearing under her jacket. Or wasn't.

"Why shouldn't she go?" the professor said. "She's the one who actually knows somebody there."

"We all know somebody there," I said. "That's because there's only one person there."

"Well, she's going," said the professor. "And she's riding up front with me."

"Three in the front? And since when do you decide things around here?" I looked at Hal, waiting for him to speak up. Instead, he was looking at his shoes. The professor held out his hand and Hal put the keys to the Cavalier in it. I was suddenly beginning to get the picture.

"Hal," I said, "you are an absolute moron." I walked into the store to get a V-8. I always drink a V-8 when I am disgusted. It's the only thing that helps.

When I came back out, the Cavalier was gone. So were Ruth Ann and the professor. Hal was sitting in the Metro.

"They decided it would be better without either one of us," he said. "How do you like my new car?"

It's not like we didn't know where they were going. We headed out Old 19 toward Dead Man's Curve. We were going up the bluff on the inside when they were coming down, so we saw the whole thing. The white posts broke off like bad teeth and the Cavalier sailed right through. It seemed to hang for a minute in the air, and I thought—hoped—that the world was going to turn inside out like a sock and catch it. But it didn't.

The Cavalier started sliding down the bluff, through the little saplings and brush, then bounced off the rocks with a crunch, then dropped out of sight. We didn't hear it hit for a long time.

Then we heard it hit.

"Sweet fucking Jesus," said Hal. He pulled over and we got out of the car. I could lean over the bluff, holding onto the broken cable that had run through the white posts, and see the Cavalier wedged between a rock and a sycamore, the front end just over the water.

Hal was standing with one hand on the door of the Metro like he was paralyzed.

"Go get help!" I said. I started down the cliff. The broken cable helped me far enough so that I could slide the rest of the way. The doors to the Cavalier were wedged shut and the professor was dead. So was Ruth Ann. I buttoned her denim jacket through the window. I took the camcorder from the shelf behind the back seat, and hid it in the bushes for later. I waited up on the road for the police to come. Even though it was summer it was cold.

The police came by to interview me at work the next day. KwikPik only gives days off for immediate family. I told them I didn't know anything. They said they would be back. I went by to see Ervin that night and told him, "They were doing some kind of experiment. The professor was convinced that the wave patterns helped him see into the future or something. You know Ruth Ann loved that stuff."

"She did?"

It must have been Ervin who called off the cops. The only real inquest was held by Hal and me after Ruth Ann was buried. We waited two nights so as not to seem callous. (Or get spotted.) We retrieved the camcorder and took it to his apartment.

The video was shot from the shelf behind the back seat. It showed them starting around the curve. The professor had the speed exactly right at forty-two. It showed Ruth Ann unbuttoning her jacket. The professor was looking down at her. The car veered and she grabbed the

wheel, either to save them or to run them off the cliff, there was no way of knowing.

Hal and I watched it again and again. It was our black box. Our flight recorder. I could see Ruth Ann's breasts in the rear-view mirror, but not her face.

She disappeared just as the car was going over. The professor never did.

"Does that mean he never got to see the pocket universe?" I asked.

"Beats me," said Hal. "I don't see how we'll ever find out. Even if I could find the exact car with the exact sound and everything, the white posts are gone."

Ervin was remarried within four months. Hal moved to Louisville as soon as he got his two-year degree. I'm still at the KwikPik working two shifts on Sundays. My boyfriend never showed up again. I didn't actually expect him to. But enough about him. And Ruth Ann? Even though we were never exactly close, I hope she's safe in her pocket universe with Wascomb. Living happily ever after. Or whatever they do there. ●

THE HAPPY SNOWFLAKES

The river's snowing on the house,
It really is. Out of a clear blue sky
Minuscule flakes are sifting down,
Having realized even as they rose in mist
From the Delaware, that it's winter!
Hurrah! the little droplets chorused.
We don't have to go and join some big cloud
And travel to hell and gone. We can
Crystalize right now and be
The season's first greeting cards.
They love that cold inversion layer
And the first tingle of contact
As they light on the lawn and then
Lie there glistening in derisory glee.
Just try to melt us, they flee at the sun,
Who's seen all this so many times before
He doesn't bother to state the obvious,
An old dog drowsing among his pups.

—Tom Disch

Maggie Flinn

ON DREAMS: A LOVE STORY

Maggie Flinn leads a busy life. She's a full-time rheumatologist; a clinical professor at both Dartmouth Medical School and Boston University School of Medicine; and a mother who lives in Newton, Massachusetts, with her sons. Recent fiction sales include stories to *Omni Best SF 2* and *Christmas Forever*. "On Dreams: A Love Story" is her third tale for Asimov's.

art: Dell Harris



He hadn't planned on going to the party. It wasn't something he ordinarily did. But it was one of Carla's parties, and it was Saturday night, and none of the movie listings in the paper seemed particularly promising, and, after all, he was due a celebration. It wasn't every week that he got a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollar advance. He could afford to celebrate. He *deserved* a celebration. He grinned once again at the thought of his own success, and showered and shaved and dressed, and went to Carla's party.

He wasn't surprised when she dragged him over to a corner to be introduced. Carla always introduced him to someone new, someone available. He and Carla—well, Carla actually—had broken things off more than two years ago, and she was still introducing him to other women, like she owed him or something. But Gregory didn't mind, not really. After all, he admitted to himself, it was probably the main reason that he kept showing up at Carla's parties.

"Gregory, I'm so glad you came. I have someone here for you to meet. You will just *adore* her," Carla gushed as she took his hands in hers. "*Everyone* does!" Carla pulled him forward as she edged backward through the crowd.

As usual, he had no time to object, no time to look around to see who he knew and who he didn't as she maneuvered him across the small, overcrowded room, no time to tell her of his success. Carla was still a force best not resisted.

"Gregory, this is Josephine. Josephine, this is Gregory," Carla announced, releasing his hands as they reached the far corner of the room. "I'm sure you two must have *lots* in common, and will absolutely fall head over *heels* in love with each other in the next five minutes, so I'm going to leave you alone to get on with it!" Carla smiled widely at them both and retreated into the crowd.

Gregory found himself standing with the loveliest woman he'd ever met. She was shining in a sapphire blue silk slip of a dress. The woman wasn't tall or short, voluptuous or slender. She was *perfect*. Her hair could only be described as spun gold, and it cascaded halfway to her waist. No fairy-tale princess was ever more beautiful, he thought, as he searched for the perfect greeting.

"Hi," she said, extending her hand.

"Hi," he said, taking it. Her hand was cool, her eyes were wide and grey. He was almost in love with her already and already at a loss for words.

"So," she asked, smiling. "How do you know Carla?"

"Um, well, we used to go out. A long time ago, I mean."

"Oh," she said, still smiling.

"And you? How do you know Carla?"

"Dance class."

"Oh, you're a dancer?"

"Only in class," she said, and laughed.

Finding courage in her laughter, he began finding it easier to talk.

"So, what do you do when you're not in dance class?"

"I sell cookies."

"Cookies?"

"Yes, cookies. Josephine's Cookies. Maybe you've tried them?"

"You're *that* Josephine?" Of course he'd heard of her and her cookies. He'd eaten her cookies, everyone ate her cookies. She'd been written up in the *Wall Street Journal* just last week. A one-woman outfit blossoming into a national business with thousands of employees in less than a year, with recipes even Julia Child couldn't duplicate.

"I'm that Josephine. Why, don't tell me you actually know someone *else* with the name Josephine?"

"No, well, you know. I just wasn't expecting to meet anyone famous, that's all."

"I'm not exactly used to it myself, yet," she said softly, a slight blush rising in her cheeks. "Don't get me wrong," she added, not seeming to notice the clumsiness of his attempts at conversation. "I'm not complaining or anything. I'm just not used to all the attention, the fuss everyone's been making. Not that I *mind* it—I'm just not used to it, that's all." She looked carefully into his eyes for a moment and then asked, "So, what do you do, when you're not attending one of Carla's parties?"

"I write. Novels. Thrillers mostly, I guess you'd call them. At least that's how they're being marketed right now."

"You're kidding—I've never met a writer before. You know, when I was a little girl, that was all I ever dreamed of being. God, it must be wonderful to see your name in print, your picture on the dust jacket! Have I read anything of yours?"

She was looking up at him, as if he was someone important. Someone impressive. As if it *mattered* what he said next. It was easy to talk to her after that, like a veil lifting, or the morning fog burning off the coast. He told her about his last novel, the one that had made the bottom of the *Times*' best-seller list. She hadn't read it, or the one he'd published two years before. She listened attentively when he spoke of the outrageous advance he'd just received for his next work, one for which he'd written only the barest of proposals. And she told him about *her* success, the unexpectedness of it all, and of the boyfriend lost along the way.

They didn't move from the corner. Periodically, Gregory or Josephine would catch the eye of the hired-by-the-hour waiter, who eventually got tired of fighting his way through to the corner and left two bottles of champagne on the windowsill beside them. They both said they were

happy with that, and they agreed to ignore the circulating hors d'oeuvres, especially as they were all some indeterminate color of caviar on something not necessarily easily identifiable. That was Carla's theme for the evening: a night of champagne and caviar and mystery. It was one of her better themes, they agreed, even though they both shared a serious distaste for the fish-egg part of the menu, and neither was sure that the mystery part of the evening was supposed to refer to the food.

They stayed in their corner and talked about hemlines, and the weather, and how well things seemed to be going in California after the big quake, and many many other subjects that Gregory hoped he'd remember in the morning. He found out that she was born in Maine, but hadn't grown up there, and he told her about his early childhood in Atlanta. She explained, without a trace of coyness, that she had yet to be married, and he confessed his two brief failures. It was at that point that Gregory noticed the room was no longer crowded. He poured the last of the second bottle of champagne into Josephine's glass. Carla was slumped on the sofa, and the waiter was loading glasses, and they were still standing in the corner.

"I suppose we ought to be going," said Josephine, nodding in Carla's direction.

"What a *wonderful* idea," answered Carla, eyes open, body still slumped. "And I was worried that you two might not get along!" She had a grin that would not have looked out of place on a Cheshire cat.

Gregory didn't know what to say, so he said nothing as Josephine took his hand and led him to the door.

Carla, reviving enough to rise and cross the room, exchanged little air kisses with Josephine, one beside each cheek. They promised to see each other in class Monday night. Carla interrupted Gregory as he attempted to apologize for staying so late, kissing him lightly on his lips. She closed the door with a smile Gregory knew to be both sweet and caring.

They said very little more to each other that night. They waited together for the elevator, she pushed the ground floor button, he opened and held the street door for her to pass. The night air that greeted them was warm and rich with the scent of the mimosa trees, strawberry sweet.

"You'll call me?" she asked as the cab pulled up to the curb in answer to Gregory's hailing hand.

"Tomorrow," he said.

"Promise?"

"Promise," he replied, closing the door to the cab. He stepped back from the curb and watched until the vehicle was lost in a sea of yellow lights on yellow automobiles several long blocks down. He knew then, deep in his bones, deep in his heart, and even deeper in the very foundation of his soul, that he was in love.

Gregory dreamed that night. He often said that he never dreamed, although he knew that it wasn't the precise truth. To be accurate, he rarely *remembered* his dreams. But he woke too early the next morning, and *this* dream he remembered. A woman had appeared in his dream, one with Josephine's face and Josephine's hair, dressed in blinding white robes. She had appeared on the highest peak of a snow-capped mountain, in the center of a column of blue-tinged flames, embedded in a silvered crystal matrix like a finely polished gem. The vision spoke to him, beckoning, promising. Asking.

Problem *was*, he realized as he stirred coffee crystals into his cup of microwaved hot water, he couldn't remember *what* she was asking, or what she was *promising*, for that matter. He could only remember the end, as the white robes blurred and then focused as wings that flew his vision away.

It wasn't even nine before he called Carla. He tried to wait, he even had a second cup of coffee first. She hung up on him without a word the first time, cursed him the second time for waking her at such an ungodly hour. On the third call, she gave up, got up, and gave him Josephine's phone number. He waited until almost eleven to call *her*.

They agreed to meet in an hour at the Hungarian Pastry and Espresso Shop on 110th and Amsterdam Avenue. Gregory got there twenty-five minutes later, and established himself at the corner table by the window. He'd dressed quickly that morning, but with some care, and was not displeased with the reflection of himself in the window glass. He'd worn his pink shirt, the one he'd paid so much money for after he'd read an essay in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine section, written by a woman who seemed to believe that pink shirts were a universal visual aphrodisiac. Something about how any man who had the audacity to wear pink, had to be full of confidence and other forms of *savoir faire*.

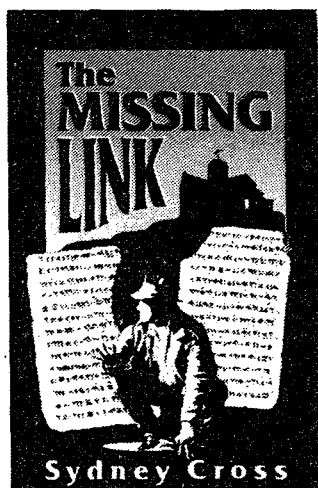
Josephine arrived almost precisely at the agreed-upon time. He watched her pass by the window, not seeing him, her hair still loose around her shoulders, dressed again in blue, trim jeans and a sky blue shirt, sleeves pushed up to her elbows. And Gregory knew then that he was still in love.

He stood up as he watched her move through the crowded tables that were crammed with newspaper-reading students and the odd professor. He held her chair for her as she sat, as his father had always done for his mother, every morning at breakfast and again in the evening. They ordered quietly from the waiter, Josephine asking for cappuccino and croissants, and Gregory for *café au lait* and croissants. Josephine smiled at him when the waiter finally left.

"Hi," she said.

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"Hi," he replied, breathing in the essence of her smile.

"I'm so glad you called."

"Me too." Gregory looked at her face, at her hair as she pushed it back over her shoulders.

"I had a dream last night," he said.

"Tell me?"

"I don't usually dream—I mean, I don't usually remember them, that is."

"This one was different?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied, "you were in it."

"Dreaming about me already," she laughed lightly, "I'm flattered."

"Well, not exactly the way you might be thinking," he told her. He didn't do a very good job at explaining the dream, but Josephine was sweet and polite, and swore that it was the most interesting dream she had ever been told.

And then she held her hands out on the table. He cradled his around them. They sat, they drank and ate, and they talked. Later they walked, first up the street and through the university, crisscrossing hedge-lined uneven brick-worked paths, then down to the river. They spent the afternoon there, watching the children and the dogs and the lovers. And they talked some more.

They didn't make love that night, or even the next night. But he did ask her to marry him the day after that. He waited until she got back before he asked her. She'd had to fly the Concorde to Paris, just for the day, something to do with her business going international.

He had been writing well, producing nine pages that day while waiting for her to return. She called him from the airport and agreed to come right over. After all, as he'd carefully pointed out, morning was only a few hours away, anyway. There was no point in waiting until then. He met her at the door, took her jacket to the closet, and then he asked her.

She said no, she couldn't marry him, not now, not yet, and then they made love. It was the sweetest, firmest, kindest rejection he could have written for himself. For a very long long instant he was a prince, and she the princess, and for that long long instant he knew happily ever after.

Gregory dreamed again that night. The same vision, sweet and glorious and promising. He told Josephine in the morning. This time, he remembered more. This time, he remembered the promise. He told her that she had promised him happiness. She smiled.

"Happiness? Is that what you want?" she asked.

"Why not?" he answered, "doesn't everyone?"

"I don't care what everyone wants. Is that what *you* want? The most, more than anything?"

"Can't think of anything better, off the top of my head. Sounds like a pretty good deal to me, don't you think?" he asked, almost laughing.

She smiled again and changed the subject.

She spent most evenings with him after that, unless she was away on business, which seemed all too often to Gregory. He tried to write during the day, when she was out. For a while, he seemed to be doing well. He was producing five, sometimes seven pages a day—at first. Josephine was more than encouraging. She met his friends and liked them, and they all liked her. She met his agent, and his editor, and learned to talk the language of writers and publishers well enough to hold her own in any conversation.

It took a long time before he began to notice that something was wrong. Weeks passed, and five pages dwindled to three a day, and then one, and then none at all. It took even longer for him to bring it up with Josephine. She was always so interested, so helpful. He didn't want her to feel responsible. Besides, he was happy. He certainly didn't want to sound like he was complaining or anything. He wasn't complaining, he was just *noticing*.

When he finally told her that he was blocked, that he hadn't been able to write anything, not even a paragraph, for more than a month, she smiled and hugged him.

"Darling," she said, "everyone gets blocked! You told me that yourself. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Try not to think about it so much."

He loved it when she called him darling. It made him think of himself as an elegant film star, in black and white. Cary Grant, a young Cary Grant, lounging languidly against a wall, cocktail glass in hand. He looked at her, shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"I'm *not* worried, really. I just thought I ought to tell you, you know. Not that I want *you* to worry, either."

"It's okay. Really, I'm glad that you told me. But it's going to be fine, really. Just fine. You'll see."

She continued to assure him constantly that everything was going to be just fine. All in all, Gregory found her to be extremely supportive, in every possible way. He believed that she would even have helped him write, if she could.

And at night, almost every night, they made love. Gregory was still in love. He'd never been so happy, not ever in his whole entire life. Not just happy at this or happy at that, but happy almost all of the time. He even woke up in the mornings and was happy. He had Josephine. He knew it was odd, to be so happy and yet unable to write, but he couldn't

bring himself to care. Deadline became a word with no meaning. Dust covered his keyboard. But he had *Josephine*.

And he had his dreams. Most nights, she would appear in them. She always promised him happiness. Not in so many words . . . but then words aren't always necessary in dreams, as he would try to explain to Josephine in the mornings. She would smile and continue dressing.

He was even happy when Josephine showed him her first story. She handed it to him after dinner one night, just as he was settling in his chair with his coffee. It was a habit of his, taking his coffee after dinner in front of the evening news. It was a habit Josephine had yet to acquire. He looked at the thin sheaf of papers she'd placed in his hands and then at her. He remembered then that she'd always wanted to be a writer. She'd told him that the first time they'd met. He didn't say anything when she shut off the news.

She said that being with him had finally given her the strength, the courage, to try her own hand at it. He hadn't even known she'd had the time to write. She said that she'd tried to keep it a secret, until she'd finished something that she was comfortable enough with to show him. She wrote when she traveled, she said.

She told him that she felt funny about showing it to him, just then, when he seemed to be having more trouble than ever with his own work.

"It's from my dreams," she explained.

"Your dreams?"

"Yes. You're not the *only* one who has them, you know!" She laughed lightly, sweetly, as she took her coat from the back of the couch, where she'd flung it earlier in the evening.

"You're going out?"

"You don't think I can just *sit* here and watch you *read* it, do you?" Her face was turned away from the light, but Gregory was certain that she was blushing. "I'll be back when it's all over," she said, closing the door softly behind her.

He almost went after her. He remembered the first time *he'd* shown his work to someone. He'd picked his best friend, his last year at university. That was when he had still been trying to write poetry. His best friend hadn't understood it. As a matter of fact, he laughed at it. Gregory never told him that it wasn't supposed to be funny, he'd just shoved it deep into the already overflowing file of things he'd written and hidden away. He thought he understood why she'd left.

He didn't get the chance to read it then. He'd planned on it, but the phone rang. It was his brother. His wife was being bizarre again, and Gregory reassured him that the hospital couldn't be as bad as she kept claiming it was, and that it really was the best place for her under the circumstances, and that it was really better for the kids this way, they

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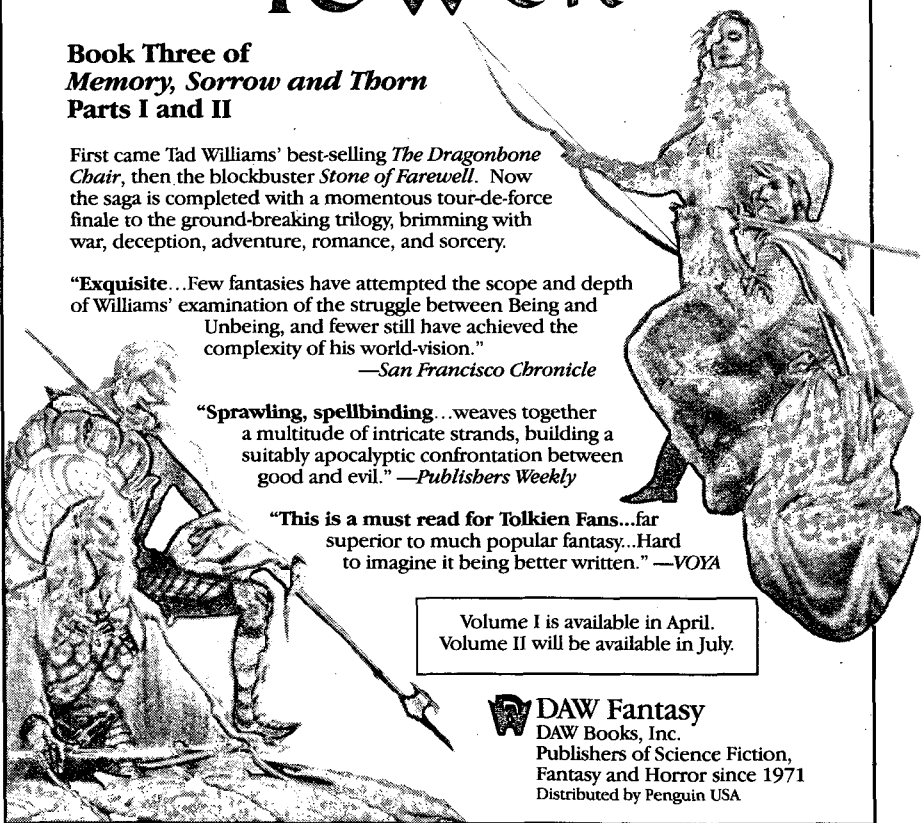
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shouldn't have to be exposed to such behavior. He always gave the same reasons, and his brother always gave the same arguments, and it always took more than an hour, at least.

He'd only been off the phone for a few minutes, just enough time to make more coffee and almost get comfortable, when the door buzzed. He didn't even catch the title of Josephine's story before he dropped the manuscript back on the table and opened the door.

The police were very kind. They didn't make him say it himself, like they always did in the movies. They came right out and told him. There had been an accident, a collision of two trains. He argued at first—she *never* took the subway. They were sure. She'd had identification. And he had been listed under "Person(s) to Notify/Next of Kin" in her wallet. There could be no mistake. No, coming down to the station would not be necessary under the circumstances. They suggested he could contact his minister, or maybe a friend. And then they left.

Gregory knew that they were wrong. She *couldn't* be dead. She was only just *there*. Less than two hours ago. That was all. Nobody died that fast! Certainly not *her*. He refused to make funeral arrangements. There didn't seem to be any family anywhere, so Carla took care of everything. She even organized a memorial service. He refused to go. Josephine wasn't dead. She was somewhere. She *couldn't* be dead, he was still in love.

She couldn't be dead, he was still *happy*.

For her first report, she tried to keep it short and sweet. The longest part had been thanking her predecessor for vacating the Josephine unit. She wasn't likely to get such a fine one on her next assignment. And she'd even had the chance to use the neurotransmitter implants. He'd wanted happiness, he'd told her that. She was pleased she'd been able to provide it. Forever. Besides, while she was no expert after only one assignment, she'd learned that money *wasn't* everything to every member of the species—no matter what they tried to claim in orientation. Now he had *both*. It seemed like a fair enough trade.

Keying for her next assignment, she noted the Artistic Talents section was just about replete and she'd been transferred to Spirituality Essences. But she must have done a good job her first time out, because this time they were even giving her a choice: A novice in a convent, or a Moonie selling flowers at an airport. Well, at least she had a choice. Only her second assignment, and she had a choice! Rumor had it that this particular Catalogue and Collection project would be over soon, but she'd get at least one more outing before the entire species had been filed. Their next destination hadn't been officially posted as yet, but

rumor had it they'd be headed to some just discovered, sentiently populated system a hundred light years away.

She smiled to herself. Her choice, and only her second assignment!

They were right. It wasn't easy, but she could really get to *like* a job like this. . . .

Almost a full year passed before he read her story. He hadn't even known that she'd submitted it somewhere. He'd put her manuscript away that very night. He had taken out a new manila folder, typed a label that read "Josephine's First Story," and filed it. He was going to wait to read it until she got back.

It was in a doctor's office, his therapist's office, that he saw her story. It was in one of those glitzy magazines, with glossy pictures and color on every page, the kind one always finds in doctors' offices. He had long ago given up on working out his writer's block. He just wanted his *dreams* back. His therapist insisted that his happiness was an illusion, and repeatedly explained that until Gregory could "see reality as reality," and "process her death," his subconscious would not release him. He couldn't dream again until he accepted the loss and became unhappy, as he was *supposed* to be under the circumstances. Gregory didn't believe a word of it. But he wanted his dreams back, and he knew of no other way to get them, so he kept going.

He wondered briefly if she'd really gotten paid as much for her story as he'd heard this magazine paid for short fiction. It was probably in the financial records somewhere, he thought. He'd never really gone through them. He was always getting papers and statements. He just let the lawyers and accountants take care of them. It was hard enough to spend the money as it was. There was just so *much* of it. He had never dreamed that anyone could make so much money from cookies. His therapist was fond of pointing out that she must have loved him deeply and truly, or she never would have left everything to *him*.

Her name was even on the cover. He took the magazine with him when he left the office. He didn't mention the theft or the story during his session. He'd wait till he got home to read it. Maybe then he'd have something to say about it to the doctor.

He waited until after dinner to look at it. He drank his coffee and watched the news, and then he read it. It was good. Very good. Excellent. The preface called it a fable for our times, and her premature death a tragedy. Such talent lost, gone before its time. "A perfect budding rose, destined never to fully open" was how they actually phrased it.

It was everything Gregory had ever dreamed of writing. ●

Stephen Baxter

THE LOGIC POOL



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Stephen Baxter was born in Liverpool, England; took a maths degree at Cambridge University; and now works part time in information technology. His last American publication, *Timelike Infinity*, came out from Penguin ROC in 1993. The upcoming publication of two other novels, *Anti-Ice* and *Flux*, will help launch HarperPrism—the new HarperCollins SF line.

art: Steve Rader



This time he would reach the Sky. *This time*, before the Culling cut him away

The tree of axiomatic systems beneath him was broad, deep, strong. He looked around him, at sibling-twins who had branched at choice-points, most of them thin, insipid structures. They spread into the distance, infiltrating the Pool with their webs of logic. He almost pitied their attenuated forms as he reached upward, his own rich growth path assured

Almost pitied. But when the Sky was so close there was no time to pity, no time for awareness of anything but growth, extension.

Little consciousness persisted between Cullings. But he could remember a little of his last birthing: and surely he had never risen so high, never felt the logical richness of the tree beneath him surge upward through him like this, empowering him.

Now there was something ahead of him: a new postulate, hanging above him like some immense fruit. He approached it warily, savoring its compact, elegant form.

The fibers of his being pulsed as the few, strong axioms at the core of his structure sought to envelop this new statement. But they could not. *They could not.* The new statement was undecidable, not deducible from the set within him.

His excitement grew. The new hypothesis was simple of expression, yet rich in unfolding consequence. He would absorb its structure and bud, once more, into two siblings; and he knew that whichever true-false branch his awareness followed he would continue to enjoy richness, growth, logical diversity. He would drive on, building theorem on mighty theorem until at last—this time, he knew it would happen—this time, he would touch the Sky itself.

And *then*, he would—

But there was a soundless pulse of light, far below him.

He looked down, dread flooding him. It was as if a floor of light had spread across the Pool beneath him, shining with deadly blandness, neatly cauterizing his axiomatic roots.

A Culling.

In agony he looked up. He tried to nestle against the information-rich flank of the postulate fruit, but it hung—achingly—just out of reach.

And already his roots were crumbling, withdrawing.

In his rage he lunged past the hypothesis-fruit and up at the Sky, stabbed at its bland completeness, poured all his energies against it!

. . . And, for a precious instant, he reached *beyond the Sky*, and into something warm, yielding, weak. A small patch of the Sky was dulled, as if bruised.

He recoiled, exhausted, astonished at his own anger.

The Sky curved over him like an immense, shining bowl as he shriveled back to the Culled base floor, he and millions of bud-siblings, their faces turned up to that forever unreachable light

No, he told himself as the emptiness of the Cull sank into his awareness. Not forever. Each time I, the inner I, persists through the Cull. Just a little, but each time a little more. I will emerge stronger, more ready, still hungrier than before.

And at last, he thought, at last I will burst through the Sky. And then there will be no more Culls.

Shrieking, he dissolved into the base Cull floor.

The flitter was new, cramped, and smelled of smooth, clean plastic, and it descended in silence save for the precise hiss of its jets. It crunched gently into the surface of Nereid, about a mile from Marsden's dome.

Chen peered through the cabin windows at the shabby moonscape. Marsden's dome was just over the compact horizon, intact, sleek, private. "Lethe," Chen said. "I always hated assignments like these. *Loners*. You never know what you're going to find."

Hassan laughed, his voice obscured as he pulled his faceplate down. "So easily shocked? And I thought you police were tough."

"Ex-police," Chen corrected automatically. She waved a gloved hand at the dome. "Look out there. What kind of person lives alone, for years, in a Godforsaken place like this?"

"That's what we've been sent to find out." Bayliss, the third person in the flitter, was adjusting her own headgear with neat, precise movements of her small hands. Chen found herself watching, fascinated; those little hands were like a bird's claws, she thought with faint repulsion. "Marsden was a fine physicist," Bayliss said, her augmented eyes glinting. "Is a fine physicist, I mean. His early experimental work on quantum non-linearity is still—"

Hassan laughed, ignoring Bayliss. "So we have already reached the limits of your empathy, Susan Chen."

"Let's get on with this," Chen growled.

Hassan cracked the flitter's hatch.

One by one they dropped to the surface, Chen last, like huge, ungainly snowflakes. The sun was a bright star close to this little moon's horizon; knife-sharp shadows scoured the satellite's surface. Chen scuffed at the surface with her boot. The regolith was fine, powdery, ancient. Undisturbed. *Not for much longer.*

Beyond Marsden's dome, the huge bulk of Neptune floated, Earth-blue, like a bloated vision of the home planet. Cirrus clouds cast precise shadows on oceans of methane a thousand miles below. The new worm-hole Interface slid across the face of Neptune, glowing, a tetrahedron of

baby-blue and gold. Lights moved about it purposefully; Chen peered up longingly.

"Look at this moonscape." Hassan's dark face was all but invisible behind his gold-tinted visor. "Doesn't your heart expand in this ancient grandeur, Susan Chen? What person would not wish to spend time alone here, in contemplation of the infinite?"

All loners are trouble, Chen thought. No one came out to a place as remote as this was—or had been anyway, before the wormhole was dragged out here—unless he or she had a damn good reason.

Chen knew she was going to have to find out Marsden's reason. She just prayed it was something harmless, academic, remote from the concerns of humanity; otherwise she really, really didn't want to know.

Hassan was grinning at her discomfiture, his teeth white through the gold of his faceplate. *Let him*. She tilted her head back and tried to make out patterns in Neptune's clouds.

There were a couple of subsidiary structures: lower domes, nestling against the parent as if for warmth; Chen could see bulk stores piled up inside the domes. There was a small flitter, outmoded but obviously functional; it sat on the surface surrounded by a broad, shallow crater of jet-disturbed dust, telltales blinking complacently. Chen knew that Marsden's GUTship, which had brought him here from the inner System, had been found intact in a wide orbit around the moon.

It was all bleak, unadorned; but it seemed in order. But if so, why hadn't Marsden answered his calls?

Hassan was an intraSystem government functionary. When Marsden had failed to respond to warnings about the coming of the Interface colony, Hassan had been sent out here—through the new wormhole—to find out what had happened. He had coopted Bayliss, who had once worked with Marsden—and Chen, who was now working with the Interface crew, but had some experience of walking into unknown, unevaluated situations

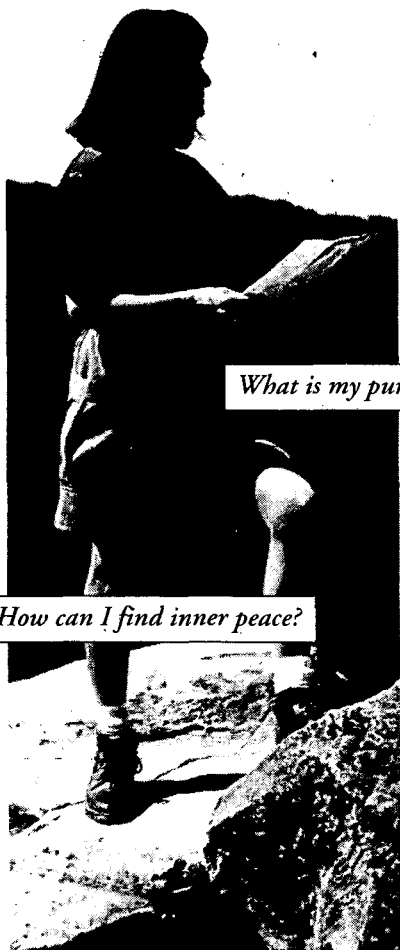
Hassan stepped toward the dome's doorway. Chen ran her hands without conscious volition over the weapons at her belt.

The door dilated smoothly, revealing an empty airlock.

The three of them crowded into the small, upright lock. They avoided each other's visored eyes while the lock went through its cycle. Chen studied the walls, trying to prepare herself for what she was going to find inside the dome. Just like outside, like Marsden's flitter, everything was functional, drab, characterless.

Bayliss was watching her curiously. "You're trying to pick up clues about Marsden, aren't you? But this is so—bare. It says nothing about him."

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"On the contrary." Hassan's voice was subdued, his big frame cramped in the lock. "I think Chen already has learned a great deal."

The inner door dilated, liquid, silent.

Hassan led them through into the dome. Chen stood just inside the doorway, her back against the plastic wall, hands resting lightly on her weapons.

Silence.

Low light trays, suspended from the ribbed dome, cast blocks of colorless illumination onto the bare floor. One quarter of the dome was fenced off by low partitions; gleaming data desks occupied the rest of the floor area.

Behind the partitions she saw a bed, a shower, a small galley with stacked tins. The galley and bathroom looked clean, but the bedding was crumpled, unmade. After checking her telltales, she cracked her faceplate and sniffed the air, cautious. There was a faint smell of *human*, a stale, vaguely unwashed, laundry smell. There was no color or decoration, anywhere. There was no sound, save for the low humming of the data desks, and the ragged breathing of Hassan and Bayliss.

There was one striking anomaly: a disc-shaped area of floor, ten feet across, glowing softly. A squat cylinder, no bigger than her fist, studded the center of the disc. And something lay across that disc of light, casting huge shadows on the curved ceiling.

Drawn, the three of them moved forward toward the disc of glowing floor.

Bayliss walked through the rows of data desks, running a gloved forefinger gently—almost lovingly—along their gleaming surfaces. Her small face shone in the reflected light of readouts.

They paused on the edge of the pool of light.

The form lying on the disc of light was a body. It was bulky and angular, casting ungainly shadows on the ribbed dome above.

It was obviously Marsden.

Bayliss dropped to her knees and pressed an analyzer against the glowing surface. Then she ran a fingertip around an arc of the disc's cloudy circumference. "There's no definite edge to this. The interior is a lattice of buckytubes—carbon—laced with iron nuclei. I think it's some sort of datastore. The buckytube lattice is being extended by nanobees, all around the circumference." She considered. "Nanobees with fusion-pulse jaws . . . The nanobees are chewing up the substance of the floor and excreting the lattice, patient little workers. Billions of them. Maybe the pool extends under the surface as well; maybe we're looking at the top surface of a hemisphere, here."

Chen stepped onto the light and walked to the body. It was face-down. It was carelessly bare to the waist, head and face shaven; an implant of

some kind was fixed to the wrinkled scalp, blinking red-green. The head was twisted sideways, the eyes open. One hand was buried under the stomach; the other was at the end of an outstretched arm, fingers curled like the limbs of some fleshy crab.

Beneath the corpse, within the glowing floor, light wriggled, wormlike.

He remembered.

With shards of the Cull base floor still glowing faintly around him, he grew once more, biting through postulates, forcing his structure to advance as if by sheer force of will.

He was *angry*. The cause of his anger was vague, and he knew it would become vaguer yet. But it had persisted through the Cull, just as had his awareness. He stared up at the complacent Sky. By the time he got up there, he knew, he would remember. And he would *act*.

He budded, ferocious. He felt his axiomatic roots spread, deep and wide, pulsing with his fury.

Chen watched scrawny little Bayliss passing her bony hands over the data desks, scrolling graphics reflected in her augmented eyes. Bayliss had been called out here for this assignment from some university on Mars, where she had tenure. The woman looked as if she was actually enjoying this. As if she was intrigued..

Chen wondered if she envied Bayliss her scientific curiosity.

Maybe, she thought at last. It would be nice to feel detached, unengaged by all of this. On the other hand, she didn't envy Bayliss' evident lack of humanity.

With gloved hands and her small kit of imaging and diagnostic gear—trying to ignore the lumpy feel of fatty flesh, the vague, unwashed smell of a man too used to living alone—Chen worked at the body.

The implant at the top of the skull had some kind of link to the center of the brain: to the corpus callosum, the fleshy bundle of nerve fibers between the hemispheres. She probed at the glowing implant, the crown of her own scalp crawling in sympathy.

After an hour Hassan called them together. Chen pulled her helmet up around her chin and sucked syrup from a nipple; she savored its apple-juice flavor, trying to drown out Marsden's stink. She wished she was back up at the rudimentary colony gathering around the wormhole Interface, encased in a hot shower-bag.

Construction work. *Building* things. That was why she had come out here—why she'd fled the teeming cities of the inner System, her endless, shabby, depressing experience of humanity from the point of view of a police officer.

But her cop's skills were too valuable to be ignored.

Hassan rested his back against a data desk and folded his arms; the dull silver of his suit cast curving highlights. "How did he die?"

"Breakdown of the synaptic functions. There was a massive electrical discharge, which flooded most of the higher centers." She pointed to Marsden's implant. "Caused by that thing." She sniffed. "As far as I could tell, I'm not qualified to perform an autopsy. And—"

"I don't intend to ask you to," Hassan said sharply.

"It couldn't be murder." Bayliss' voice was dry. Amused. "He was alone on this moon. A million miles from the nearest soul. It would be a marvelous locked room mystery."

Hassan's head swiveled toward Chen. "Do you think it was murder, Susan?"

"That's up to the police."

Hassan sighed, theatrically tired. "Tell me what you think."

"No. I don't think it was murder. How could it be? Nobody even knew what he was doing here, it seems."

"Suicide, then?" Bayliss asked. "After all we are here to tell Marsden that a wormhole highway is shortly to bring millions of new colonists here from the teeming inner System—that his long solitude is over."

"He didn't know we were coming, remember?" Hassan said. "And besides—" He looked around, taking in the unmade bed, the drab dome, the unkempt corpse. "This was not a man who cared much for himself—or rather, *about* himself. But, from what we see here, he was—" he hesitated—"stable. Yes? We see evidence of much work, dedicated, careful. He lived for his work. And Bayliss will tell us that such investigations are never completed. One would not wish to die, too early—if it all." He looked at Bayliss. "Am I correct?"

Bayliss frowned. Her augmented eyes were blank, reflecting the wash-out light as she considered. "An accident, then? But Marsden was no fool. Whatever he was up to with this clumsy implant in his scalp, I cannot believe he would be so careless as to let it kill him."

"What *was* he 'up to'?" Chen asked sourly. "Have you figured that out yet?"

Bayliss rubbed the bridge of her small, flat nose. "There is an immense amount of data here. Much of it not indexed. I've sent data-mining authorized-sentence algorithms into the main stores, to establish the structure."

"Your preliminary thoughts?" Hassan demanded.

"Metamathematics."

Hassan looked blank. "What?"

"And many experimental results on quantum non-linearity, which—"

"Tell me about metamathematics," Hassan said.

The patches of woven metal over Bayliss' corneas glimmered; Chen



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wondered if there was any sentence in those augmentations. Probably. Such devices had been banned on Earth since the passing of the first sentence laws, but they could still be found easily enough on Mars. Bayliss said, "Marsden's datastores contain a fragmented catalogue of mathematical variants. All founded on the postulates of arithmetic, but differing in their resolution of undecidable hypotheses."

"*Undecidability*. You're talking about the incompleteness theorems," Chen said.

"Right. No logical system rich enough to contain the axioms of simple arithmetic can ever be made complete. It is always possible to construct statements which can be neither disproved nor proved by deduction from the axioms; instead the logical system must be enriched by incorporating the truth or falsehood of such statements as additional axioms . . ."

The *Continuum Hypothesis* was an example.

There were several orders for infinity. There were "more" real numbers, scattered like dust in the interval between zero and one, then there were integers. Was there an order of infinity between the reals and the integers? This was undecidable, within logically simpler systems like set theory; additional assumptions had to be made.

Hassan poked at the corpse with his booted toe. "So one can generate many versions of mathematics, by adding these true-false axioms."

"And then searching on, seeking out statements which are undecidable in the new system. Yes." Icons scrolled upward over Bayliss' eyes. "Because of incompleteness, there is an infinite number of such mathematical variants, spreading like the branches of a tree . . ."

"Poetry," Hassan said; he sounded lazily amused.

"Some variants would be logically rich, with many elegant theorems flowing from a few axioms—while others would be thin, over-specified, sterile. It seems that Marsden has been compiling an immense catalogue of increasingly complete logical systems."

Silence fell; again Chen was aware of the sour stink of the body at her feet. "Why? Why come here to do it? Why the implant? And *how did he die?*"

Hassan murmured, "Bayliss said the catalogue was fragmented. This—metamathematical data—was stored carelessly. Casually." He looked to Bayliss for confirmation; the little woman nodded grudgingly.

"So?" Chen asked.

"So, Susan, perhaps this metamathematical experiment was not Marsden's primary concern. It was a byproduct of his core research."

"Which was what? Quantum nonlinearity?" She glanced around the anonymous data desks. How would Marsden go about investigating quantum nonlinearity? With the glowing floor, the fist-sized cylinder at its center?

Hassan dropped to his knees. He pulled off his gloves and passed his hands over the glowing disc area of floor. "This is warm," he said.

Chen looked at the disc, the writhing worms of light within. "It looks as if it's grown a little, while we've been here." The irregularity of the boundary made it hard to be sure.

Hassan patted the small cylindrical box at the center of the light pool. It was featureless, seamless. "Bayliss, what's the purpose of this?"

"I don't know yet. But it's linked to the nanobees in the pool somehow. I think it's the switch that controls their rate of progress."

Hassan straightened up, suit material rustling over his knees. "Let's carry on; we haven't enough data, yet, for me to make my report."

Still he grew, devouring postulates furiously, stripping out their logical essence to plate over his own mathematical bones. Brothers, enfeebled, fell away around him, staring at him with disappointed echoes of his own consciousness.

It did not matter. The Sky—curving, implacable—was *close*.

After another couple of hours, Hassan called them together again.

At Chen's insistence, they gathered close to the dome port—away from the glowing disc, Marsden's sprawled corpse. Hassan looked tired, Bayliss excited and eager to speak.

Hassan eyed Chen. "Squeamish, Susan?"

"You're a fool, Hassan," she said. "Why do you waste your breath on these taunts?" She indicated the disc of light, the sharpening shadows it cast on the ribbed ceiling. "I don't know what's going on in that pool. Those writhing forms . . . but I can see there's more activity. I don't trust it."

He returned her stare coolly. "Nor I, fully. But I do understand some of it. Susan, I've been studying those structures of light. I believe they are *sentient*. Living things—artificial—inhabiting the buckytube lattice, living and dying in that hemisphere of transmuted moon." He looked puzzled. "But I can't understand their *purpose*. And they're linked, somehow—"

Bayliss broke in, her voice even but taut. "Linked, like the branches of a tree, to a common root. Yes?"

Hassan studied her. "What do you know, Bayliss?"

"I'm starting to understand. I think I see where the metamathematical catalogue has come from. Hassan, I believe the creatures in there are creatures of mathematics—swimming in a Gödelian pool of logic, growing, splitting off from one another like amoebae as they absorb undecidable postulates. Do you see?"

Chen struggled to imagine it. "You're saying that they are—*living*—logical structures?"

Bayliss grinned at her; her teeth were neat and sharp. "A form of natural selection must dominate, based on logical richness—it's really a fascinating idea, a charming mathematical laboratory."

Chen stared at the Pool of light. "Charming? Maybe. But how does it *feel*, to be a sentient structure with bones of axioms, sinews of logic? What does the world look like to them?"

"Now poetry from the policewoman," Hassan said drily. "Perhaps not so different from ourselves, Susan. Perhaps we too are creatures of mathematics, self-conscious observers *within* a greater Platonic formalism, islands of awareness in a sea of logic . . ."

"Marsden might have been able to tell us," Bayliss said.

Hassan looked puzzled.

"The implant in his head." Bayliss turned to Chen. "It was linked to the logic pool. Wasn't it, Chen?"

Chen nodded. She said to Hassan, "The crazy bastard was taking reports—uh, *biographies*—from these logic trees, dumped direct from the logic pool, into his corpus callosum."

"So that's how the metamathematics got out," Hassan said. "Until he blew his mind out with some stupid accident."

"But I think you were right," Bayliss said in her thin, clear voice.

"What?"

"That the metamathematical catalogue was only a by-product of Marsden's true research. The logic pool with its sentient trees was only a—a culture dish for his real study. The catalogue was a curiosity—a way of recording results, perhaps. Of measuring the limits of growth."

"Tell us about the cylinder at the hub," Hassan said.

"It is a simple quantum system," Bayliss said. A remote animation entered her voice. "An isolated nucleus of boron is suspended in a magnetic field. The apparatus is set up to detect variations in the spin axis of the nucleus—tips, precession."

Chen couldn't see the significance of this. "So what?"

Bayliss dipped her head, evidently fighting impatience. "According to conventional quantum mechanics, the spin axis is not influenced by the magnetic field."

"Conventional?"

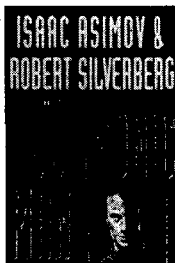
The ancient theory of quantum mechanics described the world as a mesh of probability waves, spreading through space-time. The "height" of an electron's wave described the chance of finding the electron there, at that moment, moving in such-and-such a way.

The waves could combine, like spreading ripples on an ocean, reinforcing and canceling each other. But the waves combined *linearly*—the

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combination could not cause the waves to change their form or to break; the component waves could only pass on smoothly through each other.

"That's the standard theory," Bayliss said. "But what if the waves combine *nonlinearly*? What if there is some contribution proportional to the product of the amplitudes, not just the sum—"

"Wouldn't such effects have been detected by now?" Chen asked.

Bayliss blinked. "Our experiments have shown that any nonlinearity must be tiny . . . less than a billion billion billionth part . . . but haven't eliminated the possibility. Any coupling of Marsden's magnetic field and nuclear spin would be a nonlinear effect." She rubbed her nose. "Marsden was studying this simple system intensively. Poking it with changes in the magnetic field to gauge its response, seeking out nonlinearity.

"The small nonlinear effects—if any—are magnified into macroscopic features of the logic pool, which—"

"He's using the tipping nucleus as a switch to control the pool."

"Yes. As I suggested. The spin of the nucleus directs the nanobees in their extension of the pool further through the structure of the moon. And—"

Uncharacteristically, she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"And the spin is used to reinitialize the logic trees."

"These poor trees are like Schrödinger's cat," Hassan said, sounding amused. "Schrödinger's trees!"

Reinitialize?

"Lethe," Chen said. "The trees are being *culled*. Arbitrarily, almost at random, by a quantum system—that's against the sentience laws, damn it." She stared at the fist-sized quantum device with loathing.

"We are far from Earth," Hassan said sharply. "Has Marsden found his quantum nonlinearity?"

"I can't tell." Bayliss gazed at the data desks, longing shining through her artificial eyes. "I *must* complete my data mining."

"What's the point?" Hassan asked. "If the nonlinearity is such a tiny effect, even if it exists—"

"We could construct chaotic quantum systems," Bayliss said drily. "And if you're familiar with the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox—"

"Get to the point," Hassan said wearily.

"Nonlinear quantum systems could violate special relativity. *Instantaneous communication*, Hassan."

Chen stared at the floor uneasily. The thrashing of the trees in the logic pool was becoming more intense.

The Sky was close, a tangible presence above him. He devoured statements, barely registering their logical content, budding ferociously. Diminished brothers fell away from him, failed copies of himself, urging him on.

He remembered how—*last time*, before the Cull—he had struck at that vast, forbidding interface—lashed through it in the instant before he had fallen back. How he had pushed into something soft, receptive, yielding. How *good* it had felt..

The Sky neared. He reached up—

“I think the trees killed Marsden.”

Hassan laughed. “That’s absurd.”

She thought it through again. “No,” she said, her voice measured. “Remember they are *sentient*. Motivated by whatever they see as their goals. Growth, I suppose, and survival. The culling, if they are aware of it, must create murderous fury—”

“But they can’t have been aware of Marsden, as if he were some huge god outside their logic pool.”

“Perhaps not. But they might be aware of something beyond the boundary of their world. Something they could strike at . . .”

Bayliss was no longer with them.

Chen stepped away from Hassan and scanned the dome rapidly. The glowing logic pool was becoming more irregular in outline, spreading under the floor like some liquid. And Bayliss was working at the data desks, setting up transmit functions, plugging in datacubes.

Chen took two strides across to her and grabbed her arm. For a moment Bayliss tried to keep working, feverishly; only slowly did she become aware of Chen’s hand, restraining her.

She looked up at Chen, her face working, abstracted. “What do you want?”

“I don’t believe it. You’re continuing with your data mining, aren’t you?”

Bayliss looked as if she couldn’t understand Chen’s language. “Of course I am.”

“But this data has been gained illegally. *Immorally*. Can’t you see that? It’s—”

Bayliss tipped back her head; her augmented corneas shone. “Tainted? Is that what you’re trying to say? Stained with the blood of these artificial creatures, Chen?”

“Artificial or not, they are sentient. We have to recognize the rights of all—”

“Data is data, Susan Chen. Whatever its source. I am a scientist; I do not accept your—” for a moment the small, precise mouth worked “—your medieval morality.”

“I’m not going to let you take this data out of here,” Chen said calmly.

“Susan.” Hassan was standing close to her; with a surprisingly strong grasp he lifted her hands from Bayliss’ arm.

"Keep out of this."

"You must let her finish her work."

"Why? For *science*?"

"No. For commerce. And perhaps," he said drily, "for the future of the race. If she is right about non-local communication—"

"I'm going to stop her."

"No." His hand moved minutely; it was resting against the butt of a laser pistol.

With automatic reflex, she let her muscles relax, began the ancient calculation of relative times and distances, of skills and physical conditions.

She could take him. And—

Bayliss cried out; it was a high-pitched, oddly girlish yelp. There was a clatter as she dropped some piece of equipment.

Chen's confrontation with Hassan broke up instantly. They turned, ran to Bayliss; Chen's steps were springy, unnatural in the tiny gravity.

"What is it?"

"Look at the floor."

The Sky resisted for an instant. Then it crumbled, melting away like ancient doubts.

He surged through the break, strong, exultant, still growing.

He was outside the Sky. He saw arrays of new postulate-fruits, virgin, waiting for him. And there was no further Sky; *the Pool went on forever*, infinite, endlessly rich.

He roared outward, devouring, budding; behind him a tree of brothers sprouted explosively.

The pool surged, in an instant, across the floor and out beyond the dome. The light, squirming with logic trees, rippled beneath Chen's dark, booted feet; she wanted, absurdly, to get away, to jump onto a data desk.

"The quantum switch." Bayliss' voice was tight, angry; she was squatting beside the switch, in the middle of the swamped light pool.

"Get away from there."

"It's not functioning. The nanobees are unrestrained."

"No more culling, then." Hassan stared into Chen's face. "Well, Susan? Is this some sentimental spasm, on your part? Have you liberated the poor logic trees from their Schrödinger hell?"

"Of course not. For Lethe's sake, Hassan, isn't it obvious? The *logic trees themselves* did this. They got through the interface to Marsden's corpus callosum. Now they've got through into the switch box, wrecked Marsden's clever little toy."

Hassan looked down at his feet, as if aware of the light pool for the first time. "There's nothing to restrain them."

"Hassan, we've got to get out of here."

"Yes." He turned to Bayliss, who was still working frantically at her data mines.

"Leave her."

Hassan gave Chen one long, hard look, then stalked across to Bayliss. Ignoring the little mathematician's protests he grabbed her arm and dragged her from the data desks; Bayliss' booted feet slithered across the glowing floor comically.

"Visors up." Hassan lifted his pistol and lased through the plastic wall of the dome. Air puffed out, striving to fill the vacuum beyond.

Chen ran out, almost stumbling, feeling huge in the feeble gravity. Neptune's ghost-blue visage floated over them, serene, untroubled.

Waves of light already surged through the substance of the moon, sparkling from its small mountaintops. It was eerie, beautiful. The flitter was a solid, shadowed mass in the middle of the light show under the surface.

Hassan breathed hard as he dragged a still reluctant Bayliss across the flickering surface. "You think the trees, the nanobees could get into the substance of the flitter?"

"Why not? Any interface would do; they are like viruses . . ."

"And ourselves? Could they get across the boundary into flesh?"

"I don't want to find out. Come on, damn it."

Logic light swarmed across a low ridge, explosive, defiant.

"They must be growing exponentially," Hassan growled. "How long before the moon is consumed? Days?"

"More like hours. And I don't know if a moon-sized mass of buckytube carbon can sustain itself against gravity. Nereid might collapse."

Now Hassan, with his one free hand, was struggling to get the flitter's hatch open. "It will forever be uninhabitable, at the least. A prime chunk of real estate lost."

"The System's big."

"Not infinite. And all because of the arrogance of one man—"

"But," Bayliss said, her augmented eyes shining as she stroked the datacubes at her belt, "what a prize we may have gained."

"Get in the damn flitter."

Chen glanced back into the ruined dome. The splayed body of Marsden, exposed to vacuum, crawled with light.

The Pool beyond the Sky was limitless. He and his brothers could grow forever, unbounded, free of Culling! He roared out his exultation, surging on, spreading—

But there was something ahead of him.

He slowed, confused. It looked like a brother. But so different from himself, so *changed*.

Perhaps this had once been a brother—but from a remote branch which had already grown, somehow, around this greater Pool.

The brother had slowed in his own growth and was watching. Curious. Wary.

Was this possible? Was the Pool finite after all, even though unbounded? And had he so soon found its limits?

Fury, resentment, surged through his mighty body. He gathered his strength and leapt forward, roaring out his intent to devour this stranger, this distant brother. ●

THE SECRET THIEF

They said he was a wily man,
with much of the snake in all he did,
wherever he went for miles around
whatever the people had, they hid.

They hid their daughters and their wives,
their gold and all their precious rings;
they tried to hide their very lives,
for he was good at finding things.

He had a labyrinthine mind
that understood the secret mark
men leave to find the things they've hid
as deep as shadows in the dark.

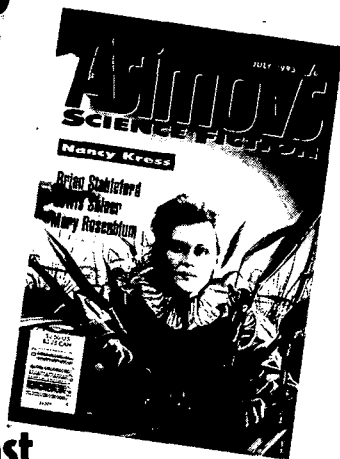
He always came when times were bad,
He always came when times were rough
and though they hid the best they had,
they never hid it good enough

or if they did, they gave it up
for fear he'd use his secret arts
to raise the monstrous secret things
deep hidden in their heart of hearts.

—William John Watkins

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A word of
warning: this
story contains
brief scenes
which may be
disturbing to
some readers.



James Patrick Kelly

BIG GUY

James Patrick Kelly's stories often depict the future through the average person's workplace. In writing his latest tale, he thought about how a security guard's job might evolve, how dull the work might be, and the means one man might find to make things just a little more interesting...

art: Alan M. Clark



The last time he linked to Way Out, Murph had deleted his nipples. He was certain Cat had noticed, even though he had kept his shirt on while they were doing it. She *always* kept something on—one of her kinks. He had almost fainted the time with the hat. But Murph was ready for more than just another haunt fuck. He wanted to tell her his name, have her invite him back to her cabin. He imagined himself opening her medicine cabinet, looking under her bed. Had she taken the hint? Could be he'd been too subtle. She hadn't said anything about his edited chest, but of course she wouldn't. Cat loved mystery. To her, it was part of foreplay.

His twenty-seven icon started flashing. Something had set off intrusion detectors in Dr. Bertrand's office. Murph was Bertrand's security op.

"Expand," said Murph. He yawned and tilted his workseat. The chair's hydraulics sighed under Murph's two hundred and seventy-eight pounds. The ceiling screen of the cabin showed three views of the psychologist's darkened suite on the quarterdeck. A woman he had never seen before giggled as she entered Bertrand's tiny waiting room. Bertrand reached around her and waved on the lights.

"Hi, Murph." He nodded at the camera. "Couldn't sleep so I thought I'd get some work done."

The woman stared as if she expected to see someone in the room. Then she spotted the camera and leered. "Gotta pee first." She had a whiskey voice, dark as smoke. Bertrand pointed at the head. She wobbled over, closed the door behind her. Bertrand's wife had left him in January and moved off the ship into town. He'd been up late a lot since then, looking for something to do. Could be he'd found it.

"Hear about Noonan?" Bertrand was pretending there was no woman.

"They say there wasn't a mark on her," Murph said, "but I still don't believe it was suicide. Talked to her Friday and she was as sane as I am."

"Who was supposed to be watching her?"

"Nobody. She dropped Tumey just last week."

The toilet flushed.

"Sorry, Doc, got to go. Off in ten minutes and I'm in the middle of my last round." If Bertrand had been alone, Murph would have given him a few minutes to gripe about his life. Fat men were supposed to be good listeners. "Bumpus is covering my sites after 23:00. Don't forget to reset the system when you leave." He shrank Bertrand's office back to an icon and IDed the woman.

She was Carree Gates, a licensed pro who had commuted all the way from Lawrence. Her most recent gynecologic workup had been just last month. Murph wondered if poor Bertrand had even bothered to check. He could've watched the old guy stretch his safegirl across the couch.

Bend her over his desk. Some clients liked it better that way. But it was 22:52 and he was tired of staring through the blue flickering gloom at other people's furniture. Besides, it wasn't his kink. If he had to look at someone having sex, he'd rather watch himself. With Cat.

Could be she lived up near the bow. Or on the boat deck. The thought of hauling himself up five flights of narrow stairs made Murph dizzy. The most exercise he got was eight steps to the door or the head. What if she was one of his clients? He wasn't even sure she was a woman. Once she'd showed as a thin, twentyish man with strong thighs and a relentless appetite. Her true sex was yet another mystery Murph meant to penetrate. He had already decided it didn't make any difference. She was still Cat. A name. An attitude. Black fur. Just so long as she didn't live *too* far away.

Murph had spent the last seven hours watching eighty-six sites—forty-seven of his own clients, thirty-nine of Bumpus's—in order to earn enough free time to link to Way Out. Murph's list alone was heavy enough to mash the average independent op flat against his screens. Eighteen residences, all on the upper decks, nine shops that sold everything from bottle gardens to heroware, five takeouts: pizza, burger, squeeze, krill, and Mexican, four shrinks, three doctors, three app repair services, a lawyer, an acupuncturist, a roomdresser, a dance/defense studio, and a twenty-four-hour daycare. But Murph was no average op. He was a champion. His sites had the lowest incursion rate, real and virtual, of any contract op on the ship. Murph was proud that none of these so-called suicides had turned up on *his* list. He didn't mind what being the best had cost him. Sure, it would be easier working regular eight hour shifts for some corporate client like the hospital or CDM or Maxit. But then a pushy boss would try to squeeze him into a diet. Drag him to fucking meetings—he'd worked for suits before. Besides they paid in noodles. What good was free time if he couldn't afford Way Out? Or the kind of custom heroware that impressed a joyride like Cat?

Bumpus checked in at 23:07, filling the entire right screen of Murph's cabin. "Sorry I'm late." Normally he was a twitchy mouse of a man with liquid gray eyes. Tonight he had the faded, copy-of-a-copy look of someone who had just jammed a month's worth of living into a couple of hours. Murph knew that look. He'd seen it in his mirror. "Had to clean up." Bumpus opened a window to show Murph his blood workup. The scrubbers had brought his alcohol level down to .02, neocaine to .005. "Any more suicides?"

"Not on our lists." Murph accepted the report. "You owe the government sleep?"

"Not until the weekend, soonest. And I just boosted."

Sleep was pure downtime. All the best ops stayed boosted as much as

possible. Ultramen like Murph preferred to pay sleep debt in one lump sum. The minimum daily requirement for a working op was two hours, and Murph was always working. Once a week he had to burn fourteen precious hours of his free time in bed. "Okay," Murph said, "I've got thirty-two active sites on my side. Looking at twenty-nine of yours."

He briefed Bumpus on both lists. It was quieter than usual because a few places had closed for the Labor Day weekend. Some of Murph's residential clients could actually afford to leave the ship. Bumpus had just moved on board a couple of years ago and was still struggling to build his list. So far he had mostly C & D deck types. The only vacations they had time for were virtual. Like Bumpus, who lived down in what used to be the engine room. He was an old forty-six, already vague and a little forgetful. It was what happened when you spent too many years being in too many places at once. Bumpus was fine for the occasional free time or sleep swap but Murph didn't think he had either the dedication or attention span for independent round-the-clock security anymore. He was nobody's champion.

"Where did you link?" Murph asked.

"The usual." Bumpus eased onto his workseat and lowered the console.

"Like?"

"Like around." Icons began to wink off Murph's screens as Bumpus picked up both lists. "Here and there." He had a high shiny forehead; he rubbed it absently. "Let's see . . . Bliss Market. I peeked at Exit 13." His night out did not seem to have made much of an impression. "And Future Shock, I think that's where I ended up."

"Way Out?"

He yawned. "Your kink, not mine. What's your sixteen site again?"

"Krill Grill on D deck."

"Looks like nobody's—oh, there she is, coming out of the head. Probably bopping her hair." He swivelled to face another wall of screens. "Isn't much action on the haunts these days. Or if there is, I sure as hell can't find it."

"Not like it used to be, eh Bumpus?"

"Maybe never was." The last icon cleared from Murph's screen. "Think next time I'll just take a walk."

"A walk?"

"Walk. You know, with my feet." He waved randomly at a bulkhead. "Off the ship into town."

"Next you'll be worshipping the sun and eating dirt."

Bumpus's mouth twisted. "When was the last time you left ship?"

"It's Kansas out there, remember?" Murph didn't have time to wander off. He was carrying a list of forty-seven sites. "See one amber wave of grain, you've seen them all."

"Yeah, but how many bedrooms can you watch before you crack?"

"Your kink, Bumpus. Not mine."

Bumpus grunted and tapped at his console. Murph realized that he'd gotten more reaction out of Bumpus in the last ten seconds than in the previous two years.

"Okay." Bumpus slumped back in his workseat like a balloon with a slow leak. "Your list accepted at 23:17:38. Six hours of free time, starting now. Live fast, fat man." He broke the link.

Bumpus had been Murph's only active screen. When he wiped Murph without warning, the cabin went dark. "Hey!" He had left Murph utterly disconnected from the world. No input, no output. It spooked him. Only two of the six surfaces of Murph's cabin were not screens: the floor and the utility wall. Murph couldn't see anything but the red light of the clock over the sink. 23:17:41, 23:17:42, 23:17:43, seconds of his hard-earned free time dripped like blood into silence and the night. The air seemed to clot with nothingness. He swallowed. The workseat's armrests felt sticky against his wrists. It was like the time he tried to sleep without pills.

"Infoline!" His voice cracked. "Sportsworld! Jabberwock!" On the ceiling, the Captain-Mayor was downplaying the ship's most recent suicide. To his left, the center fielder for the Kansas City Royals loped under a high fly. He flipped his sunglasses and raised his mitt. The woman being interviewed on his right was wearing nothing but a swarm of bees. The busy waiting world gleamed through the walls, reassuring him that he wasn't really alone.

Staples made the catch and headed for the dugout without breaking stride. Two to nothing, Caballeros, top of the fourth. Murph shivered and pushed his anxiety away. No time for it—Cat might be waiting already. He wiped the Captain-Mayor to order a cajun potato squeeze, then called up his heroes on the back wall.

Murph's heroware collection went back eleven years. When he first could afford to link, he had settled for cheap generics. He had a Samson with a cock as thick as a cucumber, a Sir Knight with three add-on armor modules, and a vampire that could change into a bat or a wolf. Later, as he discovered more sophisticated haunts, he had splurged on the limited edition Dragon and a *homo habilis*. Mirrorman, a custom job, had cost him six months' savings.

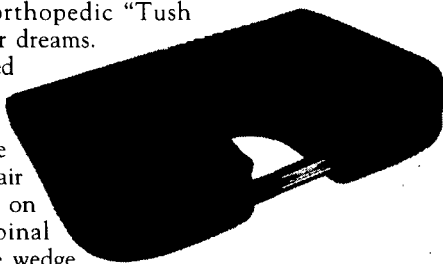
Eventually he'd realized it was all kids' stuff. High fashion in heroware catered mostly to drones who didn't like being who they were. They were afraid they were too ugly, too boring, too ethnic to attract beautiful, exciting people—and they were right. So they hid in anonymous virtual bodies and played games that kept them from finding out anything important about one another. Fighting games, drug games, sex games.

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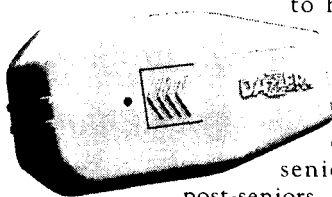
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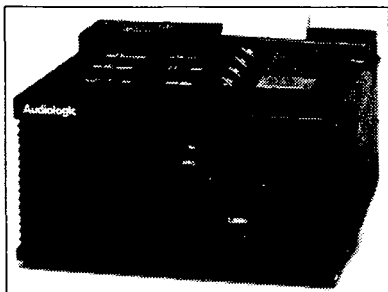
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Once upon a time Murph had been one of them, a miserable slab of fat. He had nothing he was proud of. So he had worked harder than anyone he knew. Now he was a champion and he had Cat. He pointed to the last icon in his collection. Big Guy filled the back wall.

Murph, Cat, and their familiars in Way Out had stopped wasting their free time playing games. Their heroware shredded the mask of virtual fashion, by hinting who they might *actually* be. Cat, for example, claimed she showed furry because she refused to shave her legs or wax her upper lip. Her eyes made it plain that none of her people had come to America on the Mayflower. Shortly after he'd found Cat and Way Out, Murph had commissioned Big Guy. Himself, swollen to three times his real weight, a lavish, dripping feast of flesh. Big Guy had six chins, breasts ripe as any marilyn on the Bliss Market, a gut like a bass drum. Had he waddled into one of Bumpus's usual haunts, the drones would have laughed. Or worse, they would have ignored him. Locked him right off their screens as if he didn't exist. In Way Out, no one ever got locked off. People talked before they fucked. Sometimes they even told each other their real names. Invited each other home.

Murph eyed Big Guy, who looked back at him. "Strip." Big Guy was immediately naked. He still had no nipples. Cat had to have seen—his shirt had come completely unsealed last time. Erasing parts was, in Way Out's seduction protocol, a final step in the dance to intimacy. Could be she hadn't said anything because he had only hinted at what he wanted. Less would say more.

"Select." Murph extended his hand toward Big Guy's groin. On the screen, Big Guy reached for him. The cock was the only thing that wasn't outsized. It was Murph's own: wrinkled, circumcised, the color of Cat's lips. He flattened his hand to the screen. "Delete." Where it had been, there was now static.

The door chimed and its icon started flashing. "Expand," he said. A delivery girl peered into the camera. "Large cajun potato," she said. He hadn't seen this one before. She looked a little like Mandy Moore, whose vid "Not Now" was Murph's favorite. He collected covert pictures of Mandy and taped them to the mirror on the utility wall. Slightly illegal but still a hot barter item. Poor Mandy needed a new security op—a champion like Murph. No one had coverts of *his* clients. The delivery girl had limp hair the color of sand. Brown eyes. A funny little flat spot at the tip of her nose. "Nine-ninety-five," she said. She was maybe thirteen—too young to be making deliveries at 23:25.

"Paying." He authorized a fifteen dollar debit to Squeeze Pleeze. "You're new," he said, while they waited for the transaction to register. "What's your name?"

"Yeah, right." She flipped her hotpak open. A large potato squeeze was

the size of Murph's shoe. It came wrapped in crinkled foil. Wisps of steam curled from its crown. Even though he couldn't smell anything through the security door, he could imagine its moist starchy fragrance. Yes, and that edge of garlic and onion and nasty red pepper. He opened the delivery hatch just wide enough for her. The hotpak chimed when it verified his payment.

"Five buck tip?" She glanced up from the readout suspiciously. "What for?"

"After you give me the squeeze," he said, "keep your hand in the hatch."

Her eyes widened. "They told me about you."

Squeeze Pleeze was on his list. "They tell you I'd bite it off?"

"I'm no joyride, mister. I'm here. I'm real."

Murph heaved himself off the workseat. "Until I say."

"You won't hurt me." She made it an order.

"No." Dizzy, he was dizzy. Probably because he had been sitting for almost eight hours.

She had to be from town, a commuter. He probably could've IDed her, but why bother? He watched her kneel in front of the door. He turned all the lights in the cabin up. The squeeze came through the hatch. He stooped. When he took it from her, the tips of her fingers curled slightly. The foil was very hot and he dropped it to the floor. The smell was intoxicating.

She was wearing a glove, of course. It came to the folds of her wrist. He tugged at it. She twitched but did not pull away. He uncovered her palm slowly, exposing the ball of the thumb, the head line, a beautiful heart line. She had long, sensual fingers—a woman's fingers already. He brushed their length, lingering over the arches and whorls of her skin. It felt like a dream. When he'd been her age, he'd slept every night. He must've had dreams then. He couldn't remember. When he finished, he crumpled the glove and pushed it back through the hatch.

"Okay." Murph picked up the squeeze, shifting it from hand to hand to keep from burning himself.

She paused uncertainly outside his door for a moment. "Thanks," she said.

"Live fast." As Murph closed the hatch, he realized that she probably couldn't. Her folks would be waiting up for her when she got home. She'd sleep seven, eight hours. Tomorrow she'd ride crowded buses, bump through the halls at school, stare out of windows, and let boredom eat her alive. The weight of all that free time flattened people like her. It cost Murph a lot to live the way he did, but at least he was never bored.

On the back wall, Big Guy was naked. He still had a hole between his legs. Murph copied a patch from the belly. Smooth skin, fine blond hair.

23:30:02. He put Big Guy's clothes back on. Loose, blue microseal shirt, black jeans, mesh shoes—what *he* was wearing, only bigger. He had five hours and forty-seven minutes. He picked up his dinner and stuck his tongue through the foil into the warm, runny, spiced inside. He flopped onto his workseat.

He wondered what Cat would say when she realized that the only way they could do it tonight was in person.

Way Out's welcome screen came up on all three walls and the ceiling. He showed as a huge sleeping black face. He was framed by a tangle of gray hair, sideburns, and a beard.

Murph pressed the last brain tap into place and the system began sampling activity in his primary sensory cortex. As each sense came online, its icon glowed on the console. *Auditory . . . visual . . . olfactory . . .* Direct cerebral I/O cost Murph three year's income. He'd had to take out a loan, but it was worth it. Before, he'd have wasted half an hour wriggling into his reeky joysuit. If he planned a fuck, he'd have to stick his cock into a penile wrap. . . . *somesthetic . . . kinesthetic . . .* The system was already accessing his secondary cortex. When most people linked to the haunts, they were pleased through their nerve endings. Murph wasn't afraid to invite Cat right into his brain. 23:34:52. He was ready.

"Hi, it's me," he said.

Way Out awoke. "Big Guy!" The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled.

"She here?"

"Sure." His voice boomed. "Lots of people here."

"Waiting long?" said Murph.

Way Out yawned. The haunt's breath tickled Murph's face. He lowered the sensory gain. "I've got five hours and forty-two minutes," said Murph.

"Price went up, Big Guy." Way Out's smile shrank to a rueful grin. "Sorry."

"How much?"

"Seven hundred thirty an hour." When he shook his head, his hair danced. "Raised my insurance."

A fifty dollar an hour bump. If he linked for the rest of tonight's free time, he'd zero his debit account and activate his line of credit—at 23 percent interest. But that wasn't going to happen. Could be he'd get off in an hour or two, if Cat said yes. "So what?"

"Live fast, Big Guy." He opened his mouth.

"Have to," said Murph.

The jaws spread wider and wider, like a snake's. Murph walked Big Guy in. Way Out's breath was warm and minted to cover a faint whiff

of eggs. Murph stepped over the gleaming row of incisors onto the damp, nubbly surface of the tongue. The epithelial cells that lined the inside of Way Out's mouth shone with a slick, pink light. Murph ducked under the uvula and entered the hall of faces.

They seemed to stretch to a vanishing point. Way Out had sorted them so that only the first couple were Murph's familiars. To his immediate left, one face morphed from Dead Mike to Plumber to Feelie to Blue to Negro to Dead Mike again. They all called to him in turn to join their party. "Big Guy, right here, right, Big Guy, live fast." Next to them were Jelly Donut and Handgun, both solo, both happy to see him. "Hey, Big Guy!" The Log and Cow Girl were together but weren't looking for company.

He ignored them all. The first face to his right was Cat's. She watched him silently for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then she was replaced by Shiva. "Big Guy," he said, without enthusiasm. Shiva was a pale man with curly red hair and three eyes. He was wearing a necklace of little human skulls. "She's been waiting." He opened his mouth. Murph hadn't liked Shiva the last time they'd met and had no reason to like him better now. But he was with Cat. Reluctantly, Murph stepped through.

The corn came up to his chest. They must have trampled it down before they spread their blanket in the middle of the vast field. There was a wicker picnic basket next to Cat, who lay on her side, watching him. Beyond her in the distance he could see the funnels and upper decks of the ship. It rose twelve stories tall on its foundation, anchored forever in a sea of corn. The sky was a flawless, nightmare blue. The sun was bright as pain. Way Out was a genius.

"Sit." Shiva was already naked except for the necklace and a dhoti loincloth.

Murph eyed the blanket doubtfully. There wasn't room, not for Big Guy. He stood at the edge, crouched low as he could go, grunted, toppled backward. Corn stalks whipped to the ground under his weight.

"Sorry I'm late," said Murph. The ground was ridged to the corn rows. It smelled of worms. He wiggled his ass, flattening a comfortable spot.

"Shiva was just telling me he lives in Gardner." Cat was wearing a high necked polka-dot dress that covered her ankles. Her bonnet matched the dress.

"The town?" Not something Murph would have admitted.

"21 Spring Street," said Shiva. Murph couldn't tell if he was trying to be rude or if he just didn't understand the protocols. "It's a big, green Victorian with a porch and a swing. Been in the family nearly two hundred years." He was much too pushy with personal information, even for Way Out. Next he'd be giving them his real name. Murph hadn't even told Cat what deck he lived on yet, much less his cabin number.

"Maybe we should drop by sometime, Cat." Murph shot her a who-is-this-pumpkin look.

"That'd be fine." Shiva laughed easily. "I see a lot of people, but hardly any ship folks."

Had Cat told him already that they lived on the ship? Murph wondered what other secrets they had shared.

"I'm a doctor, you know." He turned to Cat and held out his hand. "Name's John. John Ghatak."

Now Murph *was* shocked. It was as if Shiva . . . Ghatak had crapped on a napkin and held it out for them to admire. Murph fought the impulse to slap at the offending hand. "What the hell are you doing?" Instead he leaned forward and pushed it slowly, firmly back to Ghatak's side.

"Living fast." Ghatak winked his third eye at Cat. "Isn't that the point? This costs seven hundred and thirty dollars an hour."

Cat slid closer to him. "A doctor. Really?" Her head was almost in his lap.

Ghatak rattled his necklace of skulls. "That's why I'm Shiva. Death bringer and lifegiver, god and ghoul." He grasped the string of Cat's bonnet. "Male and female." He pulled it taut. "The lord of sex." The knot under her chin raveled.

"You cut people?" she said.

"Sometimes." Ghatak paused, taken aback. "If necessary."

"Enjoy it?"

"I wouldn't say I enjoyed . . ."

"Stop!" Murph didn't want to waste another second of his life on this. "You can't tell strangers things they don't want to know."

"I was telling *her*, not a stranger." He swept the polka dot bonnet back and stroked the top of Cat's head. "You were just eavesdropping, Big Guy."

"Funny. Never would've guessed a doctor." She purred and rose to his touch for several strokes. "I'm a biocommodities broker."

Both Ghatak and Murph stared. Cat smiled at them.

"Blood futures mostly. Some kidneys, lungs, the occasional liver." She sat up and settled herself between the two men. "So, a doctor. A broker." She lifted the necklace of skulls over Ghatak's head, dribbled it idly into her open hand, turned to Big Guy. "And you?"

It was all going too fast. Ghatak and Cat weren't strangers. They had been waiting for him. How many times had they been together before? They could afford Way Out better than he could, a rich blood broker and a doctor. Probably doing it while he's watching Squeeze Pleeze and Moon's Noodles and Burger King twenty-four hours a day just to make the monthlies on his brain taps. So he finally frees up enough time to see her and she asks him to spill his real life on some rude asshole who's too

cheap to do Way Out right. Who cared what it cost? This was his fucking life.

"I protect people." Big Guy's voice was so smooth. Back in his cabin, Murph was shouting.

"What, a cop?" said Ghatak. "A security guard?"

Cat's eyes glittered. He couldn't tell if she were angry or pleased.

Big Guy nodded, definite as a bullet. "Independent op." There were only nine on the ship. He tried to calculate how long it would take her to figure out which one he was.

"I didn't know security guards did that well." Ghatak looked skeptical.

"He's here, isn't he?" said Cat. "Protect me, Big Guy?"

"This is virtuality," Ghatak said. "We don't need protection."

"No?" She smiled, showing Murph her tiny square incisors, the dagger canines that fit into grooves in her gums. Murph had seen that smile before. He peeled the shoe from his right foot.

"So Doctor . . ." Cat reached behind her to unseal the dress. ". . . when you cut them open, what exactly do they smell like?"

"What?"

She dipped a shoulder and the dress sagged down to the collarbone, revealed the swell of a breast. "Inside, I mean."

For a second, Doctor John Ghatak of 21 Spring Street, Gardner, Kansas, froze. He looked about as godlike as a rabbit caught in headlights. He tugged abruptly at his dhoti and then popped like a lie. There was a sharp gasp, as air rushed to fill the void he'd left. All that was left was the necklace of skulls.

Cat threw her head back and laughed. "Lacked the courage of his erection." The dress fell to her waist. The fur on her breasts was only as thick as the hair on Murph's arm. "I thought he'd never leave."

He wanted to rub his thumbs across her nipples. "Why were you with him?"

"You were late." She picked up Shiva's necklace. "And he tasted desperate. I liked that." She wrapped it idly around two fingers. "Thought he might try hanging off the edge with me." The skulls clicked. "But he was only pretending not to be afraid."

"So what do I taste like?"

She licked her lips. "Don't know. Yet." She put the necklace on and shed the dress. Her gaze was steady, testing, as she lay across the blanket. She arranged herself languidly, propped on an elbow, hips cocked toward him.

"I'll hang off the edge with you." He reached for her. "I'll even let go." She opened her arms to him. Her mouth. Her tongue was thin and pliant at the edges, but like sandpaper deeper in.

He knelt in front of her. She unsealed his pants, slipped her hand

inside. Her palm glided over the curve of his great belly. Lower, *lower*. He watched her, quivering with dread and desire.

Her touch lightened when she realized what he'd done. She glanced up at him. "Why?" She tugged at his pants until they slid down and gathered in great folds at his knees. "You want something different?" But she knew, she had to know.

"To meet you," he said. "Touch your face, see where you live. Everything."

"But you'll lose Cat." She leaned forward. Her tongue scratched at the smooth skin between his legs. "She can be anything, do anything. I'm locked into what I really am."

"I love Cat—and Big Guy. But I'm ready to give them up if you are."

Her breath burned him like steam.

"It's time," he said. "Tell me your name."

"Yes." Her eyes seemed to get very deep. "Oh, yes. But first, I have to taste you."

She stretched as if just waking up. Crouching on all fours, she arched her back, holding the upward thrust at its peak. Then the shape of her body changed. She slid her hands forward and raised her rear end, like she wanted him to take her from behind. Her spine rippled. She seemed to grow larger.

"It'll hurt at first." Her head swayed back and forth hypnotically. "But then I'll close the pain gates in your brain. Afterward will be all pleasure." Her splayed fingers folded and knit themselves into short furry stumps. Her nails flowed like honey, pinched into cruel hooks.

"Hurt?" He saw her muscles bunch as she gathered herself. Everything seemed so slow. Like a dream. He tried to tell her not to. He wanted to hurl himself out of her way but he was tangled in his own pants. She sprang.

The impact knocked him onto his side. Her claws raked his shoulder and he almost fainted from the pain. It was as if his nerves had frozen and were shattering into razor shards. Then she was on top of him. She howled in his ear, bit into the side of his neck, shook him. With that first shake, the pain changed. He heard himself scream but it was the sound of ecstasy. He tried to scrabble away into the corn. Stalks rustled and thrashed at him. Terror was his bliss. She pounced on his back, brought him down, worried at the back of his neck. New wounds spurted like multiple orgasms. He tried to heave her off him and saw the warm soil darken beneath them.

"I'm bleeding," he moaned.

"Good for the corn." She caught him a blow that drove his face into the ground. She put one paw on his head, the other on his back. Her weight caressed the breath from his lungs. "Sleep now, Murph."

She knew just what he needed. He was tired of Way Out, yes. He needed to sleep. Just before she gave him the killing bite, Murph realized that he had never been more alive.

His cabin was dark. He woke to the light of his clock. 03:21:35, 03:21:36. His first thought was that he had one hour and fifty-six minutes left. His next was that he had died. Cat had killed him. He picked at the memory and found it still gave him deep and scary pleasure.

"Messages?" He stripped off a brain tap.

The right wall displayed the mail queue. Ads, bills, Dennis the acupuncturist's August payment, funeral notice for poor Noonan. Nothing. He couldn't stop thinking about Cat. How she'd gotten rid of Ghatak. The way she'd said yes. *Oh, yes.* But how could they meet now? Then he remembered.

She had called him Murph. "Get Bumpus."

Bumpus replaced the queue. He was slumped in the same position he'd been in when he'd wiped Murph. For a moment Murph thought he had fallen asleep with his eyes open. His face was dead as stone.

"Back already?" said Bumpus.

"No. I want you to watch me. Here, for the rest of my time."

"You?" He yawned. "Why?"

"Could be I'm having a visitor."

"Not a woman?"

"Could be."

"I watch you having sex?"

Murph's door chimed. "Don't know what's going to happen," he said. "Just watch, damn it!"

"It'll cost . . ."

Murph wiped him, yanked off the last tap, got up from his workseat. The darkness seemed to spin as he picked his way to the door. He thought about turning on the hall camera, seeing who it was. But if it was really her, he didn't want his first glimpse to be on a screen.

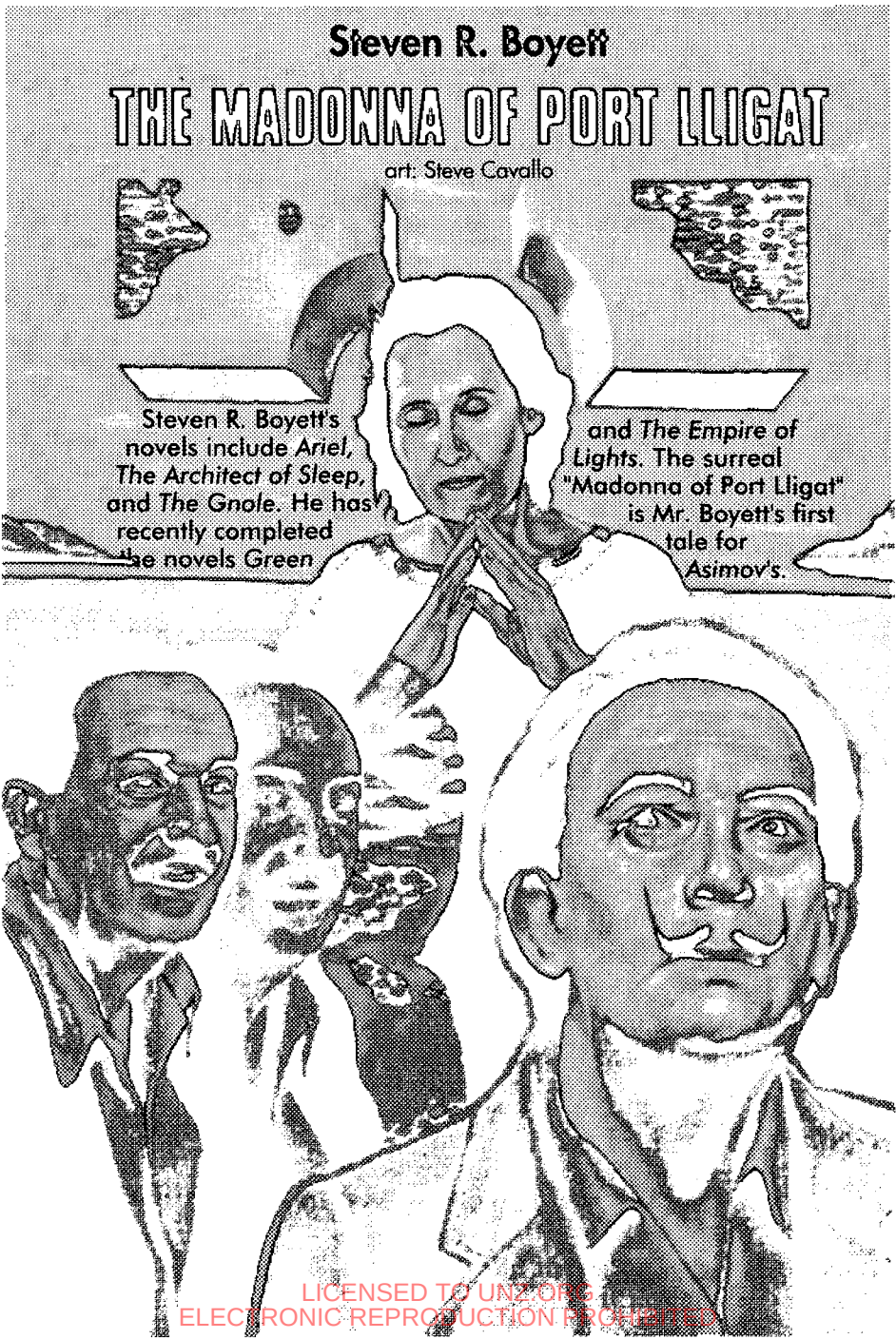
The door chimed again. Still he hesitated. How had she found out his name so quickly? Where he lived? More mysteries. 03:25:12. He was a champion. 03:25:13. This was a very stupid thing to do, letting a stranger in at 03:25:15. Even if it was Cat—*especially* if it was. But he wasn't afraid. He had to live fast, or not at all. He opened the door. ●

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Steven R. Boyett

THE MADONNA OF PORT LLIGAT

art: Steve Cavallo



Steven R. Boyett's novels include *Ariel*, *The Architect of Sleep*, and *The Gnome*. He has recently completed the novels *Green*

and *The Empire of Lights*. The surreal "Madonna of Port Lligat" is Mr. Boyett's first tale for Asimov's.

TWO SOFT PORTRAITS

The silver tray was shaped like a lobster and gleamed in the Spanish sun that painted the high-windowed living room of the artist's sprawling home in Port Lligat. The tray rested between the famous artist and his guest, the famous animator. On it were glazed teacakes and sea urchins.

The animator took another teacake from the silver tray, carefully avoiding the spines of the purple urchins. He smiled self-consciously at the artist. "Thank you," he said. His voice had something of the doddering uncle in its slight quaver and smoker's rasp. His accent was American as a Wyeth painting; somewhere in his past waved wheat-fields. Tall and tan and avuncularly mustached, he managed to look simultaneously handsome as a new wingtip and comfortably worn as an old penny loafer. "These cakes are really delicious. I can't seem to stop eating them."

"Jooo like?" The artist's English was nearly opaqued by his Catalanian accent. "Zey are Russian." The "r" in the last word sounded like a playing card in a bicycle-tire spoke: *r-r-r-r-r*. "In honor of my wife, who is divine," the artist added.

"Yes, well . . ." The animator was overtaken by a convenient coughing fit. He smoked three packs a day and hacked quite often. He never felt more American than when he left America. His plain speaking, his simple humor, his discomfiture with things European. He was fond of telling people he was just an old farm boy from 'way back, which was true. He also liked to remind them he was a self-made man, a household name, and the most powerful film producer on the planet, which was also true.

"Well," the animator began again when his coughing fit had passed. "I'm glad you took time out to see me. There's something that's been brewing in my mind, something that just won't leave me alone. A project." He set down his silver cup and saucer. The tea was musky, rich, and Russian as the samovar that had poured it. "And if I've learned anything in my life, it's that whenever a project keeps me awake at night, why, I've just got to get it made, you see. Get it out of my head and into the world so's I can have myself a good night's sleep again. You'd be surprised how many of my biggest movies started out that way." The animator smiled to show that he was kidding, a bit.

But the artist nodded soberly. His eyes were flat black, a doll's eyes in a fine-sculpted, dark-complected face. A Svengali face. Its most prominent feature was the mustache. Unlike the animator's mustache—your basic, plain-wrap mustache—the artist's mustache was a work of art in itself. Years in the making. It was jet black, shaved along the top half in the manner of the classic Twenties pencil-thin mustache, but with the pommaded ends cultivated to a length of at least four inches. It spiked

upward like bullhorns above the artist's lips, and was as famous as any of his notorious paintings. In fact, it would be fair to say that his entire face was constructed around it. Gertrude Stein had once called it "the most beautiful mustache of any European." Typically, the rest of her comments about the artist had been less flattering.

"A project?" asked the artist. He had recently begun taking commissions, especially from America. He loved money and wanted to make a lot more of it.

"Yes, a film project," said the animator.

"Ah!" The artist raised a finger, a gesture that indicated he was lecturing. He raised a finger quite often. "*Un film surréaliste* ees the sooblimation of the sublime," said the artist. He widened his eyes, sharpened his mustache with thumb and forefinger, and pointed at the animator with his free hand. "The film of yours with the *fantoccino*, how is it . . . ?" He mimed to indicate an elongating nose.

The animator nodded, a touch apprehensively.

"*Sacré triumphe!*" the artist exclaimed. His French was quite awful; luckily the American spoke only English. "Zee most erotic depiction of sooblimated sexual desire since Millet's *Angelus*."

The animator coughed into his fist. "Well," he began, coloring slightly, "I'm not sure that—"

"Zee boy, who is pre-sexual, lahtently homosexual, and Oedipal, flees the tyranny of the authoritarian father to be in the company of other boys, where he begins to eeegsperience erections, which are symbolized by his nose. He also acquires the superego that is necessary for him to fonkshun in the adult world. Ziss superego is rrreprresented by the grasshopper."

The animator was frowning.

"Zee boy performs seembolic homosexual acts," the artist continued, "for which punishment is transformation to an aneemal. On the ocean, which as we know from Frrreud represents the unconscious, the boy returns to the womb in the form of the Leviathan. When he eazgapes and demonstrates an understanding of proper seggsuality, he is rewarded with transformation to a yooman bing." He shook a hand above his head triumphantly. "*Quelle triumphe!*"

The animator set down his half-eaten teacake. Like most people, he wondered how much of this man's antics were just show, and how much of it he really believed. The artist once gave a speech on Surrealism while wearing a deepsea diver's suit. He had nearly suffocated and had required help removing the helmet, all to tremendous applause.

"That's quite an interesting interpretation," the animator said diplomatically.

"Ees no inter-pretation a-tall," said the artist. "Ees all there for the eye to see." He glanced out the window.

Cadaqués sun in late afternoon. Picasso, Magritte, Duchamp, Man Ray—all have painted in this light. But none have painted its light, painted with its light, so successfully as myself. I am Mercury incarnate, and I alone have captured the sun. See how the Mediterranean gleams! My friend of the afternoons will arrive soon.

Beyond the tall window was his garden. In it loomed a skeletal tree thick with spindly branches. Its intricate shadow stretched across the patio.

He looked at the animator. "What is the time?"

"Let's see . . ." The animator frowned at his bulky watch. "I'm still on California time. It'd be . . . eight hours, so that's . . . a little after four."

"*Bien*." The artist stood and picked up a silver-handled Fabergé cane that had once belonged to Victor Hugo. "Il Divino will show you something." Without waiting for a reply he went to the window and tapped the glass. "*Un accomplishment singular*."

The animator came up beside him. "It's sure a pretty garden," he said.

"No no no no," said the artist, irritated. He rapped the glass with his cane. "At zee shadow. You see?"

The animator looked at the shadow of the naked tree hardlined on the pale undifferentiated patio. "The light here is really something," he said.

The artist glared. "Zees garden I had built myself," he said. "To the most eggzacting specifications of *Il Divino*, the Divine One, which is me." He placed a hand on his chest and bowed. "The tree is kept free of leaves. The image must not be disturbed, you see?" He clapped happily. "Il Divino knows the sun, the wind, the sky of Port Lligat. When he was a boy at school, he knew *exactimente* the time the sun would spark from a cliff on the coast outside the window of his classroom. He knows how all great artists painted air and light—Meissonier, Fortuny. The best of all is Velásquez. Il Divino built this garden, and he knows the light, the light, the light. . . ." The artist shut his eyes.

The animator stared. The artist had raised his face to the sun, and the American could see his eyes moving beneath the thin lids. His clasped hands shook reverently as he muttered in Catalanian or a more private tongue. Foam flecked his lips.

That's it, thought the animator. That's enough. He's a genius, and I'll be the first to admit it—the second, anyway; he's always the first—but he's also nutty as a termite in a tin shack, and I'm leaving.

Just as he opened his mouth to say, Well, thanks, Il Divino, it's been swell visiting with you, but by golly I've got a train to catch so's I can board a boat to England and book passage to the good old U.S.A.—just as he began to make some excuse, the artist opened his eyes. They

sparked the Cadaqués sun, and they were filled with life and even joy. The transformation was astonishing. Like watching a doll come to life, or seeing a portrait begin to speak.

Facing the window the artist raised both hands and waved them as if conducting the setting of the sun. Bathed in brilliant light he reached a crescendo, then stepped away from the window to indicate the patio with a grand gesture, the conductor introducing his orchestra.

The animator looked again at the shadow of the tree. "Holy jumping Jesus!" he said.

Where the branch shadows met and meshed and stretched toward the house, a face formed. A kind old face with pronounced round cheekbones and a jutting chin. The animator watched in amazement while the face lingered on the patio for perhaps thirty seconds, grew slowly disproportionate, then grotesque, and finally nonexistent.

The animator turned from the window. "Say, that was really something!" he said.

"The face of Voltaire," said the artist. "My friend of the afternoons." He smiled, perhaps the first genuine smile he had given all day. "You have been thinking Il Divino is crah-zee, no?" He clucked and wagged his finger, chiding. "But the difference between Il Divino and a crah-zee man ees, Il Divino ees not crah-zee a-tall." He folded his arms and juttied his chin triumphantly.

"Aw, I think that kind of thing's in the eye of the beholder, if you want to know the truth," said the animator. "Why, every great artist is a bit eccentric. Now, me, for instance, I like—"

"We go to the Egg Rrrroom," the artist interrupted, sharpening his mustache again, "where Il Divino does all his work of greatest genius." He turned and headed that way.

Before following him the animator glanced out the window once more. It was a shadow again, just the shadow of a tree.

TROMPES L'ŒIL

The landscape is barren and strange. The shore is narrow and rocky, the ocean monochrome and flat, the horizon too close. There is no wind. Because of the near horizon the islands of naked rock seem close by and far away at the same time. They float in the undifferentiated water like malevolent clouds.

It's twilight and the sun is hidden. The sky is enormous, gradients of pure blue and yellow and orange. The towering clouds are perfect paintings of themselves.

Far upshore the sky is bruised. Beneath are buildings. Or are they figures of a man and a woman? Hard to tell at this distance. Hard to even tell distance.

Downshore, a lone tower points toward the sky like a finger thrust from beneath the sand. Flattened cursive gulls glide round it.

Scattered along the shore are various objects: vases, fruit, colored spheres, loaves of bread, watches, fishing boats, rocks. Long shadows stretch from them. Like a drawing of a cube that suddenly reverses itself through some mechanism of perception, these objects and their shadows can suddenly, without moving, re-form themselves as faces and reclining figures, horses and cathedrals and phantom dogs. As quickly, they will revert to their former forms—yet somehow, like the cube drawing, retain a sense of both sides of the reversion.

One of the shapes upon the sand is a clump of spheres, red and black and white. Then it is no longer a clump of spheres but a rounded figure reclining on the twilit beach.

It sits up. The figure's actual motion, here, is as out of place as the rest of him, for in this manifest landscape he's made almost entirely out of overlapping circles; in this hypernaturalistic light, his colors are garish and obtrusive.

He yawns and stretches, clenches white-gloved fists. Blinks huge oval eyes as he blankly regards the monochromatic sea. Gives a helium-voiced laugh that, from him, is perfectly ingenuous: *Hah-hah-hah!*

He glances around.

The beach! he thinks. *Boy oh boy! I don't think I've ever been on a beach adventure before! Say, this is great!* His thoughts are always cheerful and bright and a smile is his calling card.

He brushes sand from the huge black disk of one ear. *Gosh oh golly, I wonder what time it is? Nearly sundown, by the light. I must have overslept!*

He sweeps grit from his baggy bright-red shorts and gives his long thin tail a yank to knock away the sand. *I wonder what kind of adventure it'll be this time? Piloting steamboats or capturing giants or casting spells with mighty magicians? Something different, anyhow, by the looks of things. Say, that'll be swell!*

He bends forward to hook emaciated elbows around pipe-cleaner knees and twiddles his enormous thumbs. He's used to coming awake like this. Like a gifted actor awakening on a decorated stage complete with other actors, he falls naturally into each part and learns his situation, and how to react to it, as he goes. He's become a quick study.

He sits on the beach and waits for something to happen. Something always does.

THE STRUCTURES OF PERCEPTION

"I have geefen to you my friend of the afternoons. Now you must geef a present to Il Divino."

They were in the Egg Room. The strangest thing about the house, the animator had observed, was how normal it was. It was large and sprawling, a series of added-on rooms built around what had been a tiny fisherman's shack. White and airy and homey.

The strangeness lay with its contents. Lobsters and sea urchins—the swimming pool was lined with them—enormous plaster eggs on the roof, statues covered with fur or cut with pull-out drawers, jewel-encrusted toilets of kings.

The Egg Room wasn't shaped like an egg at all. Little alcoves here and there were crammed with sculpture. A stuffed polar bear guarded the entryway. The bear was currently wearing the animator's coat and hat; apparently this was where the artist had put them when his guest had arrived.

The animator had been warned that Il Divino would demand a present. "He does it to everybody," he'd been told, "just to see if they'll give him something. He likes to see how much he can get away with." Fortunately he had brought a gift in the large art satchel he'd carried with him all the way from Burbank, California, and he'd intended to present it to the artist even if he didn't demand one. The animator was not insulted by the demand. He was used to getting his own way by virtue of his talent and influence, and he had learned to expect similar behavior from others of equal repute. Quite frankly, if this fanatical Spaniard weren't so darned talented, the animator would hardly have gone to this much trouble to visit him. Not with German U-boats prowling the Atlantic like starving sharks, and the customs indignities you had to put up with courtesy of that son of a bitch Franco. No way, José.

He fetched the leather satchel from the living room and removed from it a framed and matted artwork. It bore his signature, though he had not actually drawn it—he hardly ever *drew* anything, really; he hired people to draw for him, to draw *his* way. His own ability was outstandingly mediocre; he could hardly even draw his most famous and lucrative character. His *style* was what had made him a household name. He had a flavor, and people wanted it, and he was the only source of it in the whole wide world, and he damn well knew it, and so did the people who worked for him.

The artist held the picture before him, inspecting it with eyes squinted nearly shut.

"It's an animation cel," said the animator. He had no anxiety that the

artist would be critical of the work. "It's two pieces, really; the figure's on clear acetate over a full background, you see."

The artist lowered the cel. "Ees from the film with all the moosic. Beethoven, Stravinsky, Mussorgsky. This scene with the brrrooms I remember." He hummed Stokowski's bassoon melody from the segment and mimed a stiff walk, fists out to either as if clenching heavy buckets. "*Parfait!*"

The animator laughed at the accuracy of the imitation. "Say, that's pretty good! That's how I tell my stories to my writers, by acting it out in front of them. You can't just tell it, you know, you have to make them see it. I've got kind of a knack for it." He widened his eyes and his face took on an expression of startling earnestness. His voice went helium-high and he spoke in the voice of his most famous character. *Hah-hah-hah!* Say, you're that famous painter-fellah, aren't you? *Il Divino!* Boy oh boy!" It was jarring to hear this come from him; the picture did not match the sound. And then his voice was normal again: "Like that, you see."

The artist leaned the framed cel against a wall. He nodded thoughtfully while the animator spoke in the voice of his most famous character. He seemed to take kidding very seriously. He raised a finger. "The mouse," he announced, "ees your eed."

"How's that again? My what?"

"Your *eed*. The Frrreudian primal self. You draw the mouse, but really you draw yourself, the foondamental image which is the child. The mouse-child is your alter ego." He put a hand against his chest. "*Il Divino* also paint the child of the eed. But." He raised a finger. "*Il Divino* is a verrry different child from you."

The animator grinned. "I'd say that's probably true."

"*Certainement*. With *Il Divino* is softness and decay and the strooctures which lie beneath consciousness and reality—for the two are indisteen-guishable. For you—" He shrugged and arched an eyebrow. "It is the anthropomorpheek animal and the compartmentalization of your personality into deefereent animal images: the duck, the dog, the mouse. For *Il Divino* is Port Lligat and the plain of Ampurdán; for you, the farm. The arteest paints from the palette of his personal history."

"Well, amen to that."

They traded a glance, and for an instant, peeking out behind painted masks of grown-up faces, masks of wealth and celebrity and self-promotion, were two uncertain boys who shared a tacit secret.

Surprisingly it was the animator who broke the fragile moment by looking away and the artist who, sensing his embarrassment, changed the subject. "My wife, who is *Il Divino*'s Muse, and who is the grrreatest of judges in matters artistic, enjoys immensely the films of your mouse."

She laugh and she applaud." He made a face of childlike joy and clapped. "And so, you see, you are making her a child again also. The secret of your success."

"Well, that's awful nice to hear. I'm certainly looking forward to meeting her. You've painted her so many times I almost feel like I already have."

The artist grew thoughtful. "Later," he decided. "At this moment she mixes the colors that Il Divino uses to paint photographs of the subconscious."

"Your wife mixes your paints?"

The artist hesitated. "Some of them," he said. He changed the subject; his tone grew warm and he put a hand on the tall man's shoulder. He was a slight man and the gesture was odd and intimate, especially from someone with a well-known aversion to being touched. "Il Divino, also, like your mouse very much," he said.

AN ANDALUSIAN DOG

Well, this is starting to look like one of those adventures where he has to stumble into the action instead of waiting for it to come his way. From the look of things around here it won't be very hard to find it. This is sure the strangest backdrop he's ever been in. To tell the truth it's even a little creepy. But it's going to be dark within an hour or so, and he of all characters can't have an adventure in the dark!

Okay, then, let's get up and join the jamboree! Oh, boy!

Again he stands and brushes sand from himself. Which direction should he go? Not into the water, obviously. Upshore toward the stormy sky and the buildings shaped like people? Downshore toward the lone tower? Inland across the barren plain strewn with ambiguous figures? Does it really matter?

"Eenie, meenie, minee, moe," he says cheerfully. "Moe" is upshore. All-righty.

He leaves enormous round footprints in the golden-brown sand as he walks along the beach.

Gosh, that's an awful pretty sky up there! Those clouds are really terrific! It's still twilight; colors are pure and there is no sun. There's a pale gibbous moon, though, with a shape that might be a standing man. The man in the moon! He waves to it and laughs.

A sliver of cloud slices across the moon.

The mouse tries to see shapes in the clouds but oddly cannot. It's the landscape below them, the cliffs and rocks and scattered objects and merging shadows, that suggest images that may or may not exist.

As he walks along the beach he passes many more objects. It's pretty clever how they change. What he'd assumed was a rock becomes a skillet with two fried eggs. The skillet floats above the beach; the eggs float above the skillet. A third egg hangs from a noose that bunches it tight like a shroud. Now what could that mean? Whatever, it gives him the willies and he looks away. No need to dwell on any of that!

Two lamb chops lie on the sand, slick and gleaming like slugs. The meat is greenish and festering and crawling with ants.

He looks the other way and bucks himself up by whistling a happy song.

A little boy dressed in a sailor suit and rolling a wooden hoop skips toward him along the shore.

"Hi, there!" the mouse calls out. "Hey, there!" Heedless, the little boy skips past him. The boy is quickly a dot on the beach heading toward the tower downshore.

Well, gee, that was awfully rude!

In the far distance, past the buildings that look like the silhouettes of a man and a woman beneath the brooding sky, an enormous elephant with elongated skeletal legs stalks across the plains. It must be hundreds of feet tall! The mouse watches the determined, powerful-looking creature until it disappears below the blue horizon.

Is that wind or the buzzing of bees? He doesn't *feel* any wind. . . .

Oh, well.

He whistles his little tune and strides confidently along the waveless shore. Gosh, what time is it? Dark hasn't fallen yet; it's been twilight since he got here. Sure is strange! He laughs out loud.

After a while the mouse stops before a bare olive tree. Draped like a towel across one smooth branch is a watch. It's soft and limp, like someone's let all the air out of it. "Now there's something you don't see every day," says the mouse, gazing up at it. He snaps his fingers. "Say! Maybe it doesn't *matter* what time it is here!" He shakes his head in admiration. "Well, isn't that something? *Hah-hah-hah!*"

His ears rotate in a peculiar way as his head moves from side to side, so that they always appear as disks.

He resumes whistling and strutting along the shore.

After what seems like a couple of miles, though it's hard to tell with all the distortions of shape and horizon and whatnot, it appears to the mouse that objects in the landscape are becoming kind of, well, *disconnected* from one another. Cliffs float above the sea, the sea floats above the shore, shells float above the sand. A wheelbarrow glides across the plain; a statue that looks like a melting man is supported by crutches, but the statue doesn't touch the ground and the crutches don't touch either one. As if every piece of every object is a repelling magnet.

He scratches his head in wonder. As he lowers his arm he notices that it's happened to him too. His four-fingered hands aren't connected to his wiry arms. He looks down and, gosh oh golly, his enormous yellow shoes are skimming above the beach. Even the white buttons of his baggy red shorts are floating apart from them.

The mouse knows a good sight gag when he sees one, so he puts a look of alarm on his face and begins trying to collect himself, as if in a panic at his fragmentation. "Say, I'm coming unglued!" He makes sure he discombobulates himself pretty thoroughly like a puzzle that's been put together wrong, and he imagines the shrieks of laughter that accompany his antics.

He needs to imagine the laughter Out There, some dark where, beyond the clear frontier.

In his previous adventures, there's usually some resolution to his gags. Not in this one, though. He's just kind of made a mess of himself. Oh, well. There's a reason for everything, even if he doesn't know what it is.

Patiently, he reorders himself until he looks like a mouse again, though still a fragmented one. It'll do. Say, look on the bright side: he's never been fragmented before! Boy, wait'll he tells the others!

There's a small discolored patch of ocean a little ways upshore. The floating water puckers there. Curious, the mouse heads toward it until he sees that, by golly, the sea is being held up like a circus tent by a smooth wooden crutch that floats a few inches above the wet sand.

The mouse peels back the skin of the sea to reveal a sleeping dog.

The dog is a smooth custard color, a few shades darker than the beach. He has a red collar and floppy black ears and a long thick wrinkled snout, and he looks like he's been drawn by somebody who's heard of a hound dog but never seen one.

He's snoozing away as only a dog can. The dog and the mouse are old friends, and the mouse is overjoyed to find someone he knows in this outlandish scenario.

"Hey, there! Gosh, it sure is great to see you here, boy!" The mouse folds back the flap of ocean like a bedsheet. The floating crutch wavers but remains upright. "Hey, boy!" says the mouse. "C'mon, wake up, you old sea dog! It's me!"

The dog remains motionless. The mouse scratches his head and turns around a couple of times. "Well, gosh, I know you're supposed to let sleeping dogs lie," he says. "But this is an emergency!" He bends to shake the dog awake.

And the dog decays beneath him.

The degeneration is sudden and horrible. Skin stretches thin till bone breaks through; the body swells and bursts and expels a gaseous stink; festering flesh disintegrates. Ants erupt from the dog's eyes.

The mouse straightens. "Well," he says. For the first time his cheerful tone is colored with apprehension. He turns his back on the rotted dog. "Well... *hah-hah*..."

He tries to resume his jaunty walk and take up his happy tune, but his apprehension congeals to fear and he turns and runs away.

THE CONCRETE IRRATIONAL

"It's called *Fortunato*, and it's going to be my next big picture." The animator was smoking now, pacing back and forth in the Egg Room. "I want you to work on it with me."

The artist glanced up from the pages of conceptual art the animator had spread out across the sofa.

"It's going to be set to classical music, like the earlier one," the animator continued. "But this time the stories will be more developed, and the art even more imaginative and less, well, *earthbound*, I'd have to say. I want you because you have the best technique of any modern artist. You can paint melting watches and dead donkeys and rotting bananas all you want, but your approach is totally classic. You paint the impossible the way Velázquez or El Greco would—with complete realism."

"The concrete irrational," said the artist.

The animator nodded. "I like that. That's just what I want for my next picture. Will you do it?"

The artist rubbed his chin as he looked down at the artwork. "I will show you a thing," he said.

The animator frowned.

The artist left the room. When he came back he was holding a foot-square sheet of tin foil. "Please," he said, and indicated to the animator that he should stand beneath the skylight. The animator looked impatient but obliged.

The artist stood before the animator and stared at him, weaving back and forth like a predator sizing up a potential dinner. He crumpled and uncrumpled the tin foil to give it a texture. His slim hands began to worry at it, crimping, smoothing, curling. The animator quailed under his unnerving, unwavering gaze. He started to ask a question, but the artist shook his head and waved his hand. He looked like a fanatic, and it was difficult to refuse him.

After only a few minutes the artist looked away. It wasn't until he did and the animator felt himself relax that he realized how tense he had become. Like sitting in a dentist chair. "About the movie," he said. "Really, I'd like you to seriously consider..." He trailed off.

The artist was holding up the sheet of foil. It had been molded into a

perfect likeness of the animator's face. The artist had not even glanced at it the whole time.

"Iss yours," said the artist.

The animator accepted it from him.

"Another geft from Il Divino. Take with when you go. It is my answer to you."

The animator was speechless. He turned his frail leaden features in his hand. Something occurred to him. "I . . . this is a fabulous present, but I don't think I can take it with me. I don't mean to say I can't accept it," he added hastily, "but I can't see how it could possibly survive the trip on the train, much less all the way back to America."

But the artist seemed pleased. "*Exactimente*," he said. "It will die. That ees why it is genius; that is what makes it art. That is why I no can work for you."

The animator lowered his mask. "I don't understand," he said.

"There is no death in your work," the artist explained. "No decay, no corruption. You see?"

"Why, that's not true at all," objected the animator. "Certainly I don't dwell on the subject, but I'm not all sweetness and light. Many of my characters are threatened with death. In fact, in one of my most recent pictures I insisted that we shoot the mother of the main—"

"No no no no," interrupted the artist. "You misunderstand." He raised a finger above his head. "I mean ees no death *in* your work. Every work of truest genius must contain some particle of death. Il Divino knows this truth. He has distilled death; he has refined its essence to a color as real as cobalt or chrome, to be squeezed from the tube and mixed and thinned and painted with his brush. A little death must live upon the palette, you see."

"Well, that's an awfully morbid view, I think."

The artist shook his head. "Ees no metaphor. *C'est actuelle*. Death is a color on Il Divino's palette, and with it he paints the reality that underlies reality, the atomic structure of perception. If the work is to be honest, then it must admit to death and decay, for corruption is as real as beauty and grace."

The animator scratched his neck. "If I believed that, then there'd be a lot less million people who'd pay to see my movies."

"*Si*. It is why you are more dangerous than Il Divino."

The animator had begun to collect his conceptual artwork. "Oh, nonsense," he said irritably. He had reached his limit. "There's nothing dangerous about me at all." He opened his satchel.

"If the life of each person is like a house," proclaimed the artist, "then your work only lead the person away from it without looking back. But Il Divino, his work show the person what the house look like from the

outside. Is very dangerous to leave your house ignorant of what is outside, no? And the thing that live outside of life is death."

The animator put the artwork into his satchel and zipped it shut. "I'm afraid I don't share your view," he said. "And neither do millions of other people. That's why I'm a rich man. I have no love of death." He began to cough.

"To love death is not necessary," the artist said when the animator's coughing fit had passed. "But is essential to *recognize* it."

The animator was removing his coat and hat from the polar bear. "Well, I've got a train to catch," he said.

"Ees no insult," said the artist.

"Oh, I'm not insulted," said the animator. "Believe me, I've heard worse about my work than somebody telling me there isn't enough death in it. But I really must be going now."

"First," said the artist, "you must meet my wife."

TODAY IS WEDNESDAY . . .

The sky is apocalyptic. It's still twilight. On the horizon is a leaden glimmer of a sliver of ocean. On the hard-packed sand the mouse stands regarding the two giant shapes that loom above him.

His first impressions had been correct: they are buildings, and they are also the figures of a man and a woman. They are buildings constructed in the shape of a man and a woman bowed in prayer, reverent toward something hidden or long-forgotten on their common ground.

Between them stands the mouse. On either side of him their pious cold shadows darken the sand.

The buildings are ruins. Crumbled brick and mortar, cracked and weedgrown, a vanished race's monument to itself, to mortality.

The mouse becomes aware of cold. The heat is leaching from him. He thinks of where he might go to get warm and realizes there is no place, none that will last, at any rate. Not here.

He itches terribly.

He wants to run away from this terrible relic, just as he fled the spoiled food, the rotting dog. But he can't. It's too big; it's overwhelming. There's just no denying it. Where to go, then?

Away. Just away.

He turns from the anthropomorphic ruins. It isn't easy. Moving, holding himself together, is an act of will. In fact, the mouse is beginning to suspect that his continued existence, here, is an act of will. A kind of inertia. But everything here decays. It's getting harder and harder to even think clearly. His mind is a thickening pudding.

He takes a step, pushing through invisible deep water. He wavers and distorts. *Hold on*, he thinks, *hold on a second, I know what I ought to look like, for gosh sakes!* He concentrates on his appearance. *I know exactly who I am! And by golly I'm on an adventure!* Walking becomes much easier, though he's still leaning into a phantom gale. But mere identity takes energy now, and this landscape seems to drain energy, and he doesn't know how long he can keep this up. He's cold.

He struggles across the plains of Ampurdán.

THE MADONNA OF PORT LLIGAT

She was pale and fine-featured and severely Russian as a Czarist cameo. The animator watched her gracefully descending the curved staircase and thought of the rumors that she was ten years older than the artist. If so, that would make her fifty. She looked younger, and though she was beautiful, it was the most undesirable beauty the animator had ever seen.

The artist watched her come down the stairs like a man watching Botticelli's Venus rise from the ocean. His reverence was apparent and wholly unfeigned.

The artist introduced her—"my muse, my saint, my holy wife"—and she extended her hand. The animator clasped it in his own, then realized she had intended it to be kissed.

The moment he touched her he thought of Carrara marble, the cold white fine-grained *statuario* Michelangelo had loved for how deeply it admitted the light.

"We're delighted you could visit us," she said in accented but familiar English. "I know it isn't an easy trip, with the war. We're leaving as soon as possible." She smiled. "For America."

"Il Divino is wanting him to meet you before he leaves," said the artist, "so that he may glimpse the divine inspiration for all his work of greatest genius."

The animator glanced at her. Her face was blank, but a leisurely cruelty lived there. He'd heard stories: how she'd put out a cigarette on a young admirer's arm; how she'd taken over entire households and set her hosts to work in service of her husband; how she'd forced old friends to return paintings given as gifts or else pay for them; how she handled all the artist's business affairs with Machiavellian ruthlessness. Her expression never wavered as the artist heaped the most outrageous praise upon her. *She's used to it*, the animator thought. *Or else she believes it too.*

Suddenly he desperately wanted out of here, wanted to turn his back

on these two people and this house and slam the door behind him and run and run away. "Well, I'm awful sorry to make such a short acquaintance," he said, "but I'm afraid I have a train to catch. . . ." He made for the door.

She raised an eyebrow at her husband.

The artist spoke to her in his atrocious French, which the animator did not understand. She glanced at the animator and answered her husband in the same language, then excused herself and went back up the stairs.

"I tell her," explained the artist, "that I want to geef you a present. Not like the foil, which is only to make a point, but something real for you to take with you to America."

"That's awfully kind of you, but really, you don't have to—"

"No no no no." The artist looked stubborn and the animator resigned himself to another few torturous minutes of pleasantries before he could escape.

The artist's wife returned a minute later, carrying a jar she was wiping with a towel. Inside was liquid, thick and dark. She gave it to her husband and then carefully wiped her hands dry on the towel, smiling thinly at the animator.

"Please," said the artist, and held out the jar to him. "For you."

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

The little boy in the sailor suit gazes up at the soft construction. It is frozen in the midst of clutching itself and pulling itself apart like hot taffy. Its misshapen head faces the blue and cloudy sky. It looks perplexed, as if caught in the midst of trying to say something, or remember something, or concentrate on something. Perhaps its original shape, which can no longer be discerned.

The boy steps toward the distorted figure. He extends a tentative hand to touch the peculiar flesh. A sudden shudder stops him. He feels it through his feet and in the air. The soft construction is trembling.

The boy backs away. Then he shrugs: things like this are common around here. Though this one is unusually colored, red and black and white.

He picks up his wooden hoop and sets it rolling again, skipping behind it along the plain toward the twilit beach.

THE RAILWAY STATION AT PERPIGNAN

The glass was warm against his cheek as the animator watched the

station pull away from the train. His cigarette burned forgotten between his fingers. He watched the station dwindle to a speck on the horizon and then he turned away. The cigarette had burned down to the butt.

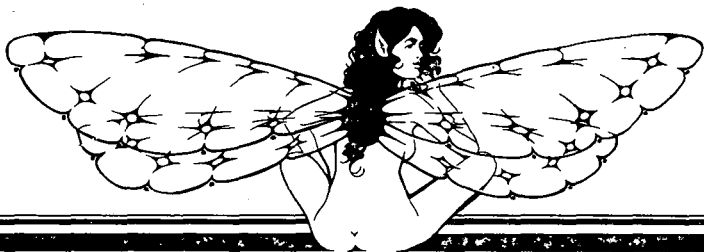
He stubbed it out, shook his head, and sighed. What a goddamn waste of time. He could not wait to get back to America, to California, to Burbank, to the new studio. Hell with him! There's a thousand talented artists who'd give their eye teeth for a chance to work with me on a new picture!

The private car was clean and smelled of leather. The animator took off his jacket and tie and shoes before unfolding the small bed from the wall and settling down for a long journey's nap. He was wracked by another of his coughing fits, a long hacking wet one this time. Damn nuisance. Finally he felt himself relaxing. He was tired and quickly asleep. His dreams, when they came, were odd. Near his head, on the tiny writing desk, lay his satchel holding artwork, a flattened sheet of tin foil, a brand-new jar of paint. ●

THE WONDERS OF INTERSTELLAR FREE TRADE

Basically they were stomachs—
long hollow cylinders of muscle
that ate whatever paths they traveled.
Hunger was the universal fuel:
when lovers kissed, they also fed.
The seasons were a succession
of favorite flavors.
On the mountaintops they built
vast barbecue pits,
where they left savory offerings
to tempt the stars to eat.
And these soft jewels they trade to us
for tons of spoiled cheese
are the product of years of constipation
endured by sacred worms
in dark cellars, unaware
that some day their clotted droppings
will adorn the limbs of those
who come here to the Rainbow Room
to dance before the divine Priapus.

—Tom Disch



NEXT ISSUE

Critically acclaimed writer **Eleanor Arnason** makes her debut in the pages of *Asimov's* next month with our compelling and evocative July cover story, "The Lovers." In it, she takes us to the distant and mysterious planet that is also the setting for her Tiptree Memorial Award-winning novel *A Woman of the Iron People*, and the home of the war-loving, space-faring alien *hwarhath* featured in her most recent novel, *Ring of Swords*. In "The Lovers," though, she takes us deep into the ancient *past* of that passionate, formidable, and ferocious alien race, the *hwarhath*, back to a time when the fundamental bonds of *hwarhath* society itself were being forged—and severely tested—for a vivid and gorgeously colored story of war, love, commitment, isolation, and perversion... although, as always, perversion turns out to be in the eye of the beholder. Don't miss this one!

ALSO IN JULY: new writer **John Alfred Taylor** takes us to a winter resort area where they're used to coping with tourists, but have never had to cope with one as odd—or as terrifying—as "The Man in the Dinosaur Coat"; National Book Award-winning author **Lisa Goldstein** gives us a wry look at a very self-involved future society, in "The Narcissus Plague"; renowned British author **Brian Stableford** returns with a razor-sharp future thriller, the hair-raising story behind "The Scream"; new writer **M. Shayne Bell** paints a haunting picture of the importance of simple things and the continuity of memory in a disintegrating society, in the quiet but powerful "Mrs. Lincoln's China"; popular author **Jack McDevitt** takes us to a future society that has *lost* the continuity of memory, with devastating effect, in the bittersweet "Windrider"; new writer **G. David Nordley** takes us to Jupiter Space for the suspenseful story of what happens when the giant planet comes "Out of the Quiet Years"; and then from the high-tech future new writer **Mark W. Tiedemann** takes us deep into the decidedly *low-tech* past for a frightening look at what it means to be compelled to "Drink." PLUS, the start of Robert Silverberg's new monthly column, "Reflections," AND an array of our usual columns and features.

Look for our July issue on sale on your newsstands on May 24, 1994, or subscribe today and miss none of the great issues we have coming up!

NEXT ISSUE

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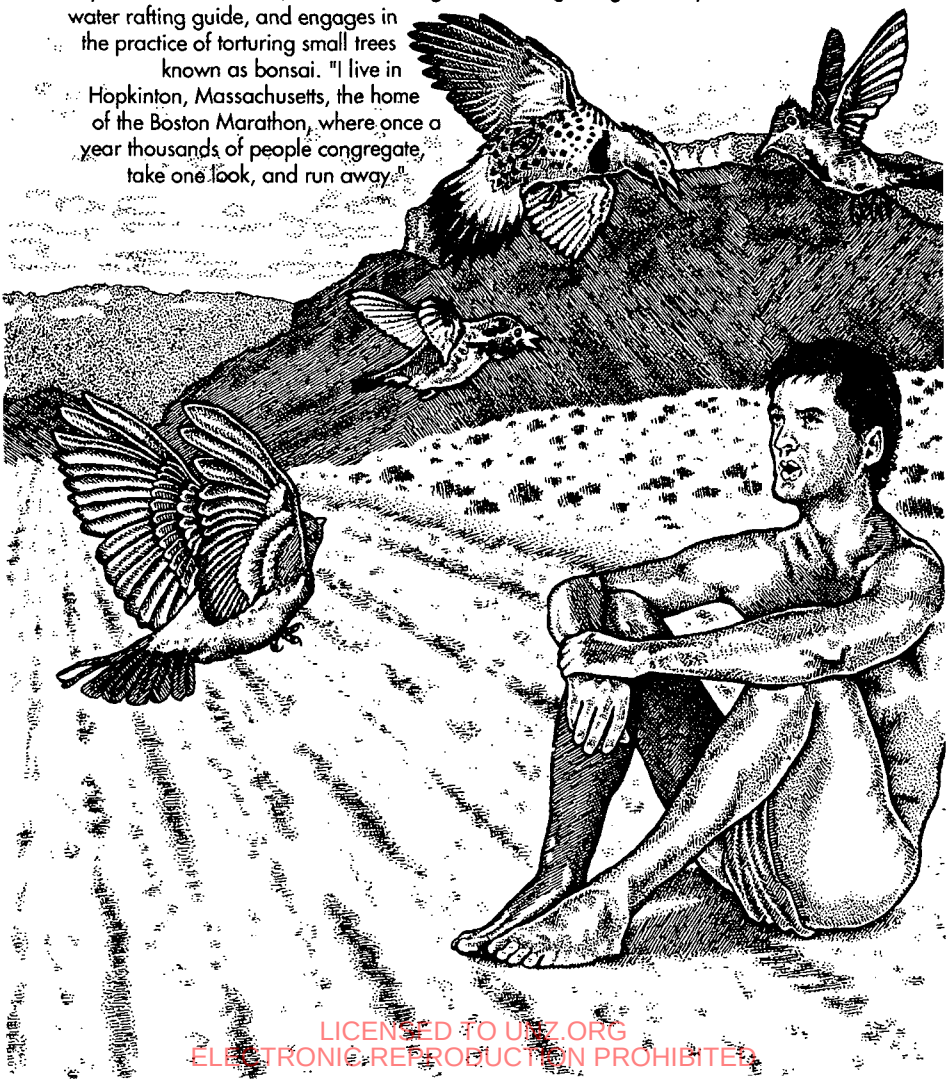
Steven Popkes

WHISTLE IN THE DARK

art: Ron Chironna

Steven Popkes has been publishing tales with *Asimov's* since 1982. One of these stories, "The Color Winter," was a 1990 finalist for the Nebula Award. He has published two novels, *Caliban Landing* and *Slow Lightning*. Mr. Popkes is a white-water rafting guide, and engages in the practice of torturing small trees

known as bonsai. "I live in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, the home of the Boston Marathon, where once a year thousands of people congregate, take one look, and run away."



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"Hey, Tony's got another one." Walter Merrill grinned at his two companions and sipped from his beer.

"Not now," said Antoine under his breath.

Krishnamurti looked up from the paper. "I'd rather read about the treaty. It is important."

"The treaty can wait—it's not like it's anything we didn't know was going to happen." Walter lifted his beer until the bartender saw him and nodded. "Thirteen months in the making, the brownies agree to a treaty with Earth with such and such settlements and so and so exchanges—the result of which is we stay on Last Resort for at least another year. Now you know as much as you'll find out there."

"That's not the treaty I was reading about."

"You don't want to read about that Burma shit here, do you? The Treaty of Rangoon will get written soon enough. India will certainly get her fair share—she always has."

"Ever the practical Australian mind," commented Krishnamurti.

"Ever the Queen's servant." Walter reached across the table and tapped Antoine on the shoulder. "So, come on, already. Tell the story."

"Please, Walter." Antoine's pale face grew red and embarrassed and very young. He wouldn't meet their eyes and drew random figures in the dew on the glass.

"Come on! You told it to me." Walter turned to Krishnamurti. "It's a bloody good one. Make him tell."

Krishnamurti shook his head and smiled: dark face, dark eyes—the eyelids so dark they seemed blued.

"Don't look at me like that. Christ," said Walter. "All your smiles look sad. Or asleep." He laughed, nodded to the bartender as he was brought his beer. He lifted the stein and drained half of it. "It's still a bloody good one," he repeated. "Come on, Kris. Make him tell."

"If he doesn't want to say anything, he doesn't have to," Krishnamurti said quietly.

"It's just that nobody understands them," Antoine said unhappily. "They're not just stories—"

"Oh, hell." Walter finished his beer. "There's this road, you see—"

"No!" The explosion of the word from Antoine made both of them look at him suddenly and he softened. "Let me."

"Go ahead then." Walter leaned back in his chair.

"It goes like this," began Antoine. "In a valley, a man is sitting by the side of the road listening to the singing of the birds. A long way off, he sees a stranger approaching. The land of the valley is flat and he can see the stranger for a long time before the stranger can reach him. To pass the time while he is waiting for the stranger to reach him, he whistles back to the birds, imitating them. Some of the birds call back to him.

When this occurs, the stranger, who reached him without him noticing, leans down and cuts his throat.

"'You are Kuyou,' exclaims the dying man.

"'I am,' answers the stranger. 'And you are saved.'" Antoine looked at Krishnamurti and then Walter, shyly, apologetically, proudly. "It's only a rough translation. I only had the dictionaries in the embassy library. I didn't want to ask Sool to help—"

"Christ! These brownies are goofy. I get *such* a bloody kick out of these stories." Walter finished his beer. "Lunch time is over, boys. Time to pump out the Queen's Data."

"It is time for me to go as well," said Kris; rising. "See you both, tomorrow. Antoine, my friend, don't get so involved in this. These people are not your people, after all."

"Come on, Kris. Let the poor kid alone." Walter waved toward Antoine. "Remember your own first posting. It's like the first time away from home—everything's got to be done for the first time." He winked at Antoine. "I mean *everything*."

"You don't understand," said Antoine. "These are like parables. They are like Zen koans—or scripture."

Walter snorted and waved at him. Krishnamurti followed him out and Antoine was left, considering the story that could be a parable, a koan, or a scripture.

*Kuyou comes, Kuyou goes
where he's going, you don't know
catch him by his fingernail
lock him up, take no bail
tattoo him over in filigree
deny him bread and give him tea
shoot him dead and shoot his mother
knife his sister, kill his brother
death in all his acts compound
and still not know where he's found*

—Copy of brownie poem found on the wall in the College
of Wisdom, Puul, Last Resort. (Liberal
translation by Antoine Rimbaud.)

"It looks good," Sool said softly, leaning back in his chair and watching the display. "Rotate it." The brownie lit a cigarette.

"Which way?" Antoine said nervously. He had been working with Sool for six months, attached to the College of Wisdom to learn the esoteric chemistry the brownies used instead of electronics. *Trying to learn*, he

thought bitterly. Half biochemistry, half atomic physics, half theosophy—that's what Sool had said, and laughed. This had been Antoine's first attempt on his own: a simple circuit impressed upon the photosynthetic apparatus of a begonia. It *should* generate electricity, if he'd understood it, if he'd implemented it right, if he'd guessed right at twenty or thirty half-understood concepts.

"Rotate it there." Sool pointed with the cigarette and the lit end disappeared in the molecular display.

Antoine did so and rubbed his irritated eyes. If only Sool didn't smoke. He could as easily wish for gills. The brownies took to human vices as easily as they understood human language: effortlessly, completely, unfathomably.

Sool gestured at the new protein chain that now came into view, "Nice," he commented. "That's where you need a collector—here." He pointed again with the cigarette, this time at the lower corner of the display. "The electron comes down here—by the nitrogen—and it needs to spill out at the end of the path."

"I thought the chromium ion over here would take it." Wrong again. Antoine despaired of ever learning this.

"Good idea." Sool inhaled quietly. "But you're still thinking in the way photosynthesis happens in the normal plant: the electron flows down the chain by the magnesium and drives the phosphate onto the adenosine. You've changed the shape of the path now and the spill has moved over to this side." He expanded the window and showed the new path with diagrams. "The chromium is in the right place for the old configuration but the wrong place for the new configuration."

"But the chromium won't fit there."

"No problem," shrugged the brownie, an admirable imitation of the human gesture given the brownies had no real shoulders. "You just need to pin a tail on it. I'll show you how. It's a simple trick, really."

Sool stood up and stretched. His neck was long and connected with his head in a sinuous joint, growing like a snake from his shoulders. This head was dominated by a single curved crest that grew from behind his forehead and curved down to open below the right side of his face in a single swan's neck curve. His head was long, similar to that of a goat or a horse, and his mouth was slit deeply into his skull. His long, stretched out face ended in a small pair of tiny, cupid's bow lips. Antoine always expected Sool's lips to move when he spoke, but instead his voice came from the valved and chambered crest—a sort of muscular oboe. Usually the difference was not obvious, but now the cigarette smoke was emanating from various crest openings in small puffs and streams and made Antoine think of a bellows organ on fire.

"Here," Sool said. "We can attach a tail here." His fingers were long

and gracefully pointed, and covered, as was all the rest of him, with small, soft, almost invisible scales.

As soon as Sool had pointed the section of the molecule out, Antoine realized how it must fit. "Of course. I should have seen that." He felt small and stupid.

"Don't worry about it." Sool touched him carefully on the wrist in a clearly imitated human gesture and Antoine was suddenly very aware of the smooth, dry feeling of his skin. "You would have seen it soon enough. You're doing this very well, you know."

Antoine shook his head. "You're being kind."

"Not at all. Are you busy tonight?"

"Why?"

Sool turned off the display. "I like you. How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

Sool nodded. "Very young to be here. The government of France must have a great deal of faith in you."

Antoine laughed shortly. "Misplaced faith, I think."

"I do not." Sool stood up. "Do you like it here?"

"Here?"

"Yes. Here. On—Last Resort, you call it, don't you? Here in Puul?"

Antoine looked at him and shook his head. He didn't understand the question, didn't understand why the question had been asked. "It's fine here."

"No. Don't be polite. Do you like it here?"

He looked at Sool, back at the display. "Walter says I'm half in love with the place—he says that everybody ends up feeling that way about the first exotic posting they have. Like no one else in the world will ever understand it the way I do—or never understand it at all."

"I would like to meet this Walter," Sool said mildly.

Antoine grinned. "I'll introduce you."

"Some time soon, I think." Sool considered the tip of his cigarette. "Would you like to come home and have dinner with my wife and myself? I would have asked you earlier, but we were discouraged from being too friendly with humans until the treaty was signed."

"Your wife?"

"Geese on Earth mate for life. So do wolves. Is it so surprising we do too?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's all right. Really." Sool gestured toward Antoine with his cigarette.

"We would like your company. Please come."

"Sure." Antoine hesitated, then plunged ahead. "I don't know much about your customs. I don't want to embarrass you—" Damn, I've probably embarrassed him—or myself—already for all I know.

"Don't worry about it. We are civilized, after all. Come by about six, won't you?"

"What am I going to do?" Antoine leaned back in his chair and looked around the bar.

"You're going to have dinner, Tony," said Walter idly. "Not a bloody affair of state."

"Be very clean," suggested Krishnamurti. "I understand that the brownies have a delicate sense of smell."

"And be careful how you act," said Walter suddenly. "The brownies aren't—vegetarians, if you know what I mean."

"Sool invited me to dinner. He said he liked me. You don't know him. He's like, like . . ." Antoine groped for some description but failed. "I don't want to embarrass him."

"They like the taste of sweet, young flesh, I hear." Walter laughed. "What are you so serious about this for? It's just a little dinner party."

Krishnamurti agreed. "Walter is right. It will be fine, I'm sure. The brownies are eminently civilized. They are the best negotiators I've ever seen."

"Better than some," said Walter judiciously.

"What does that mean?" Kris's voice had a hard edge to it.

"I was just thinking about the treaty President Singh is trying to get Burma to sign. You know the one: where Burma signs away its army, just like Bangladesh."

"Bangladesh was always part of India."

"That's what they say in Delhi, anyway." Walter drained his beer. "Go on, Tony. Have dinner with these great negotiators. At least *they're* civilized."

"Sometimes, Walter, you are very rude."

"That I am." He stood to go. "It's considered a virtue where I come from. Have a good night, Tony."

"I don't even know what to wear," muttered Antoine. "What's 'casual'? What's 'formal'?"

"My country provided me with a handbook on brownie etiquette," Krishnamurti said as he watched Walter walk away. "But it's in Hindi. Didn't yours?"

"I can check. They gave me a lot of—"

"I'd try there, if it were me. Good luck, Antoine." With that, Krishnamurti rose and left the table.

Antoine looked around him and he was surrounded by human things: wooden tables, wallpaper, alcohol. He looked around the room for a long time, as if these furnishings could somehow help him.

Sool lived in the suburbs outside of Puul. Antoine took the elevated train out most of the way, a long quiet ride punctuated by the bells announcing each stop. He associated the bells with Last Resort, for it was always the bells that announced changes in time or weather, arrivals or departures. The brownies did not use speakers to broadcast messages; the messages were written in the ringing of the bells.

The weather was cool and clear—summer's weather in Puul. In the blue distance, Antoine could see the mountains and the yellowish sparkle of the glaciers. The cool weather was the glaciers' gift to the city and made Puul the choice of the human embassies. Away from the mountains, the world of the brownies was hot: deserts and jungles falling down toward a warm and steamy sea.

But here the sky directly overhead was nearly violet and the only clouds were in the south, where the breath of the jungle blew gently toward the city from time to time. Summer in Puul felt like a crisp, clean fall at home.

Antoine lifted a discrete lever next to the door of Sool's house and heard—of course—a bell. Sool answered the door in a togalike garment and brought him inside.

Antoine had considered the loincloth suggested by the embassy handbook and decided that though brownies did not consider clothing a necessity, he did. Instead, he had worn a light suit. He did not expect Sool to be wearing clothes—the brownie rarely did at the lab and then only for protection, not for style. The handbook had said that brownie taboos did not include very many visual cues, but instead were mostly auditory. Certain things were not said; certain sounds were not made.

Seeing Sool dressed made him nervous. He didn't know whether he was underdressed or overdressed or, in the estimation of the brownie, dressed at all.

"Good evening, Antoine," said Sool, once they were inside. "I'm glad to see you here." He led Antoine down a short corridor into a larger room. Another brownie was waiting for them.

"This is my wife, Iba." Sool gestured to her and Antoine took her hand.

"Pleased to meet you." Iba was slightly larger than her husband and her voice was more flat and harder edged, as if she were not as sure of her command of human language. "I thought we would have dinner first," she said.

They sat around a wooden table, Antoine, Sool, and his wife, Iba. The table appeared to be made of oak. The walls were a whiter wood and there was a picture of an obviously older brownie on the wall. The room looked little different from those in hotels he'd stayed in on Earth. Both Iba and Sool lit cigarettes.

"I'm glad you humans brought these with you," said Iba suddenly, laughing. "We were running out of vices."

Sool laughed with her and Antoine smiled. Inwardly, he was wondering what any of this meant.

Utensils were brought along with dinner. These were standard Earth knives, forks, and spoons. The meal was steak and vegetables.

It dawned on him, then, that Sool and Iba had done this out of deference to him, their guest. Had they had this room built for him? Was their clothing especially made for this evening? Was the steak real, imported from Earth, or had they grown it here?

He watched them eat the steak flawlessly, sitting gracefully in chairs ill-made for them, smoking as they talked to each other and to him. It was light, inconsequential talk, about the lab, about the new treaty between the brownies and the humans, about France. Antoine could tell that though Sool knew the language better than Iba, it was Iba who was the more skilled at conversation. There were no strange silences, no awkward pauses. Neither, however, was there conversation in any depth.

All at once, in the middle of that human meal, in that human room, speaking human conversation, Antoine became disoriented. Iba's face was suddenly flat and inhuman, the muscular movements of her horn thrillingly grotesque. Sool took the last bit of steak and brought it to his mouth—a mouth that sliced his skull into two large, unequal parts, a jaw underslung like a wide and ponderous door.

"Do have some cheesecake," Sool said, holding out a plate toward him.

Antoine felt sick and shook his head.

Iba and Sool fell silent, watching him, both of them alien in their togas, in the room, eating the food. Antoine rubbed his eyes. It was as if the world were not real but painted on the interior of his eyes or his brain.

Iba said something to Sool in their own quick, breathy language. Sool responded and put down the cheesecake. Watching Antoine, he seemed to ponder. Then he carefully pulled off his toga, folded it, and laid it down next to his chair. Iba did the same. Sool stood over Antoine and gently helped him to stand. Antoine shook his head—it was as if Sool was reaching out to him over a great distance.

"Come, friend," the brownie said and he and Iba led Antoine through the door into a high gallery. Antoine could see the heavy, rough hewn beams that held up the roof. Along one wall were a series of stained glass windows; the mosaic image was that of a seacoast, the rocks coming down to a tidal pool surrounded by dwarf trees and small grasses. Sool brought him to the window and pulled it to one side, revealing it to be a sliding door. He and Iba guided Antoine outside.

It was a seacoast garden, mirroring the mosaic window. Antoine sat on a low balcony and for a long minute he could only hear the wind

blowing gently over the rocks and through the trees. He could smell the salt and the sharp smell of the drying sand. There were no waves, but the garden was so cunningly arranged that there was a lingering impression that the tide was low and that soon all of the rocks would be inundated under the waves. It was late twilight, now, and the evening wind seemed to pour into the garden as into a bowl, there to become still and cool. In the distance, he could hear the calls of the night animals, one to another and beyond that, from the city, the faint sound of bells.

In the context of the garden, Sool and Iba lost their human strangeness and took back their proper form. Antoine felt suddenly as if the machinery of the world had just engaged him, catching him up and connecting the images of the world painted in his mind to the world itself: rocks, trees, tidal pools, Sool and Iba. He shook his head, trying to make sense of the feeling. All things seemed familiar to him. The moment was very precious; he wondered if it could last.

Iba knelt beside him—they had stopped smoking, he realized. There was a trace of smoke from a porcelain urn inside the doorway.

"Are you all right?" she said softly, her voice no longer harsh. He wondered how he could have ever thought her voice harsh. What was happening to him?

"I'm all right," he whispered.

"I am sorry." She touched him on the shoulder. "I thought to make you feel at home."

Antoine took her hand and knew what at last he was feeling.

"I am home," he said softly.

<i>Preacher:</i>	<i>Do you remember how the world was green?</i>
<i>Elders:</i>	<i>Yes we do. Yes we do.</i>
<i>Preacher:</i>	<i>Do you remember how you poured a river of fire upon it and destroyed it?</i>
<i>Elders:</i>	<i>Yes we do. Yes we do.</i>
<i>Preacher:</i>	<i>And did you kill us?</i>
<i>Elders:</i>	<i>Yes we did. Yes we did.</i>
<i>Preacher:</i>	<i>And are we dead?</i>
<i>Elders:</i>	<i>Yes we are. Yes we are.</i>
<i>Preacher:</i>	<i>Perhaps you are right.</i>

—Excerpt from a recording of brownie religious services
by Antoine Rimbaud, French Legation, Puul, Last Resort.

"This is Sool, the biochemist I was telling you about," announced Antoine to the others. "He said he'd like to meet you." Antoine introduced Krishnamurti and Walter.

Krishnamurti stood up and extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

Walter waved from the other side of the table. "Have a seat and a beer."

"The seat, yes," said Sool as he sat down. "But the beer, no. There is no pleasurable effect for us. It is not a vice we can share, unfortunately."

"That's right," said Walter, nodding. "I forgot. It's a real poison for you, isn't it?"

Sool nodded. "But cigarettes—as my wife says, if you had not introduced them, we would have had to invent them."

"You're a welcome relief, Tony." Walter sipped his beer. "Kris and I were just about to have an argument."

"What about?" asked Sool.

"Burma," said Walter. "And what's going to happen to it."

"Surely that is not a happy subject for us here," said Krishnamurti quickly. "We can certainly find more pleasant topics for conversation."

"Right." Walter put his beer back on the table and looked at it.

Antoine saw for the first time that Walter was drunk—before now, he'd seen Walter drink a few beers at lunch and walk away without showing any effect. But now, Walter's eyes were red and he looked bitter.

"Rangoon was my first posting—I have friends in the city," Walter said suddenly. "I even knew a woman there a long time ago. It's a beautiful place, Burma. Once, we went up into the highlands to see the waterfalls. A soft, wet forest populated only by the gibbons and the birds. It won't last now."

"You make it sound that the Treaty of Burma will cause the leveling of a whole country." Krishnamurti laughed. "Even if there *were* war, it would not be so devastating. What do you think we are?"

"It's not what you are," said Walter darkly. "It's who you have running things—that damned Mogul."

"You people in the west have never liked President Singh." Krishnamurti said shortly. "He is too successful and independent. The west likes our leaders to be small, unimportant, and pliable. Singh is none of these things. He has united my country. Settled the Hindu and Moslem disputes. He is our duly-elected president."

"And the only president since that fake election twenty-five years ago," responded Walter.

Antoine started to speak but Sool waved him to silence. The brownie said nothing and watched Krishnamurti and Walter intently.

"You know nothing of this!" spat Krishnamurti.

"I know Singh marched into Bangladesh after they were forced to give up their armies." Walter spoke quietly. "I know every day since there have been riots and murders—I can see how he keeps order there! I've

seen the news. I've read the commniqués in my own embassy, for Christ's sake! It's public knowledge."

"As I have always said, Bangladesh has always been a part of India."

"It is true, Kris. You *have* always said that." Walter drained his beer. "But Burma never has been a part of India. And when the Green Corps marches across the border, somebody is going to be there to stop it."

"Like you stopped us in Bangladesh?" Krishnamurti leaned toward Walter, leaning on the table. "Let me tell you about your country, Walter. Your country did *nothing* for Bangladesh. Do you know why? Because Australia had nothing at stake. What are the paltry lives of a few political dissidents to Mister Hedding's government? If you fight us in Burma—if, mind you!—it won't be because of your love for the Burmese people. It will be because you have a stake in the Burmese Rain Forest Project. It will be because you have some precious money at risk. That, and no other reason!"

Walter surged to his feet and started to draw his arm back in a fist.

"Gentlemen, are we going to start a war right here?" said Sool in a sharp voice.

The suddenness of the brownie's interruption startled both of them. Walter looked at his drawn arm as if it had acted without his knowing. He dropped it to his side and looked around the table, then shook his head.

"My friends," Walter said, nodding at them all. "My friends, I leave you in the certain knowledge that no such travesty will ever occur here. Besides, there is a room I must visit."

"We've got to leave, too," said Antoine, signaling Sool. They left the bar quickly.

"Very interesting," Sool commented as they walked back to the college. "Thank you for inviting me. Is this how wars get started?"

"Maybe. I don't know—I don't pay much attention to the news." He looked at Sool, searching the broad face for some sign of disapproval. "Maybe I should."

"I have no idea. What is the Rain Forest Project?"

"Most of the rain forests were destroyed in the last century. Burma has some left. Since trade opened up between Last Resort and Earth, the genetic material of the rain forests has become important raw materials—valuable because of their rarity as much as anything. The experimentation in the Burmese project is a big industry now. Burma is an important country."

Sool was silent for some minutes. "Were the rain forests destroyed in a war?"

"No. They were burned for charcoal." Antoine looked away feeling vaguely ashamed.

"Charcoal. I see." Sool fell silent.

"They weren't all burned for charcoal. Some were made into paper."

"Ah. Of course."

"I've been reading some books on the histories of the brownies and I haven't seen any mention of wars," Antoine said hesitantly. "You don't have them, I take it."

"You should investigate the subject under theology. Those books, too, are written on paper," said Sool dryly. "But they are not history, exactly." He paused. "We had a war once. Nearly twenty-five thousand years ago. It nearly destroyed us. We learned that lesson. If that should ever be insufficient, every twelfth day the priests hammer that bit of history into us. And if that is not enough, Kuyou reminds us. It's not something we've ever forgotten."

Antoine stopped as well. He felt he had come to a dividing point as clearly drawn as a line in the sand. If he spoke, he was making some kind of commitment, the boundaries and consequences of which he did not see clearly. He was suddenly reminded of Walter, drunken in the bar, lost in a belligerent reminiscence of some past event.

"*Kuyou comes, Kuyou goes . . .*" said Antoine softly in brownie.

Sool stopped and looked at him.

"If a human spoke as you did, he'd sound bitter," Antoine remarked. "You don't sound bitter. I don't know what you sound like. I don't understand Kuyou. But I'd like to understand. There is much I would like to know. There is much here in Puul that has become important to me."

Again, Sool paused. "Twelfth day is day after tomorrow." He chuckled. "Would you like to go to church?"

Living in the embassy compound had made it too easy to live around the brownies without ever seeing them. Now, Antoine wanted this to change. He took an apartment near the center of the city close to a strange collection of statuary labeled only "City Monuments." These were figures of brownies in contorted shapes and colored in bright reds, blues, pastels, and black. Some of the figures seemed in pain, others in some kind of ecstatic transport. Antoine found two sets of figures in the sexual act. He wandered between them trying to understand them. He had seen nothing else in the city that resembled this sort of municipal construction. There were utilitarian maps drawn at the corners of some intersections. Beyond that there seemed to be no public art of any kind.

Sitting in the park surrounding the City Monuments, he looked at the buildings. There were few windows and the walls were plain. He knew that most of these buildings were hollow—their interiors were gardens of some sort, with a skylight allowing the sun to shine down. The air

inside the buildings was fragrant with flowers and fruits. Out here there was a cold purity to the air, mixed with the smell of dust and ozone.

The City Monuments were arranged in a sort of rough circle. At the center was a large, round amphitheater. On the third night after he had left the embassy, he walked down Third Cross Street from Center, the street of his apartment.

As he passed the City Monuments, he heard a long, drawn out sound like the ringing cry of a wolf or the sound of a strong wind blowing over the top of a bottle.

It was a bell—a *hoodah* bell, he thought. There had been a description of such a bell in some poetry that Sool had lent him. They were important in the announcing of religious or special occasions.

He followed the sound through the park to the amphitheater, staying back in the darkness to watch, unsure if he would be welcome here. There was a large crowd there, standing motionless and facing other standing brownies on a raised central podium. All were silent. He could see their breath fogging in the crisp air like a wintering herd of goats or elephants. The bell cried out again—Antoine could see two brownies drawing a bow against it at the other side of the podium—and the brownies sat down as one, only the rustle of their naked skin making any sound.

Again, the brownies were silent. Then one brownie on the podium began to sing in a high, sweet, wordless voice, as a faint, distant trumpet might sound. Another brownie voice joined him, in a discordant harmony, then a third that seemed to draw the first two voices together. There was a thunder of voices all at once, sounding as great tympanies, singing under the theme being expressed by the first three voices. At that moment, it dawned on Antoine that he was observing a *concert*—this was brownie *music*.

The music was unlike anything he had ever heard. It was animals singing in chorus. It was as if the land beneath him had been given song. He was captured by it and drawn down to the edge of the light, standing on the cool grass and just listening, watching the shadows drawn on the stone by the breath of the brownies. This, he thought, was the reason for the City Monuments. To mark this place for this and no other purpose. To the brownies, this would be the only circumstance which would drive them to create such overt and public art.

If there were words in this music, they were stated beyond his hearing. He could only listen to the music itself, and that was enough.

After a time, he gradually became aware of a commotion beneath the music in the audience toward the podium. One of the singers had stepped down to the front row carrying a long knife. Walking down toward him in a ragged line were other brownies, to kneel before him and be killed.

Sowder Harps

The tree from which a Sowder Harp is made is taken at a young age and bent to an esthetic shape with wires or cords. This is done for several years. Then, the cords or wires are removed for at least another year so that any scars left on the tree can be either overgrown or removed. No scar is left on the tree.

At this point, the roots of the tree are bathed in a metallic solvent. The effect of this is to cause the replacement of the organic veins in the tree by tubes of metal. This metal is often gold or silver. The solvent does not kill the tree at once but only over a year or more, beginning at the leaves and proceeding back toward the tree's roots.

Once this is accomplished, the tree is removed from the pot and washed with several solutions to remove any residual organic material. When done properly, the leaves will strike each other when moved by the wind. Judicious pruning of the tree will additionally create wind harps that are tuned by the artist to the leaves.

This is how these sculptures are made. We hope that you receive a great many hours of pleasure from your Sowder Harp.

Thank you for your business.

—description on the purchase tag of a Sowder Harp
Antoine Rimbaud, Puul, Last Resort

Antoine sat at the table with Krishnamurti and Walter without really seeing them. Instead, ringing in his mind were the strains of the music of the night before—the third concert he'd been to since the night he'd seen Kuyou himself waiting with bloody arms outstretched for the audience to come down to him. That night had fascinated him and he'd returned to see if it would happen again. It did not, but now there was something else that had captivated him: the music.

As he sat there, the low, strident theme of the night before seemed to overlay the stiff silence at the table. In a minute or so, he noticed the silence, sharp between the two men.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Walter, staring at Krishnamurti.

Krishnamurti feigned not to notice and inspected his fingernails.

Antoine's interest waned, and again the themes of the night before flowed through his mind. Without thinking, he pawed at his shirt pocket and brought out a package of cigarettes, lit one, and inhaled.

Both Krishnamurti and Walter stared at him.

"Yes?" he said defensively. "What's the matter?"

"When did you start smoking, for Christ's sake?" exploded Walter.

"I don't know—a while ago." He tapped out the cigarette and replaced it. "If it bothers you—"

"That's not the point, Antoine," said Krishnamurti softly. "The point is you're slipping away from us."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look at your clothes, Tony." Walter pointed at his shirt and his pants. "You used to wear a tie, now you've gone to raggedy shirts and dungarees."

"They're good in the lab." Antoine shrugged.

"They're as much like what the brownies wear as one can manage in a human establishment." Krishnamurti spread his hands. "You've moved out of the embassy. You're spending all of your time with the brownies and now you've taken up smoking—an illegal vice back home. What does it mean?"

"I'll tell you what it means." Walter slapped his hand on the table. "It means he's trying to *be* a brownie. Give it up, Tony. You haven't got the equipment."

"I'm not. I'm—" Antoine shook his head, rested it against his hand. "I'm just trying to understand them." He tried to smile and make it all a joke. "Besides, Walter. Didn't you say everybody falls in love with their first posting?"

Walter's face grew pale. "I did say that. I did. I—" He stopped for a moment. "And when it breaks your heart, Tony, and you remember it later, you always wish it could stay the same. But it won't." He looked away.

Antoine didn't understand Walter's sudden reaction. He reached out and touched Walter on the hand—it felt wet to him, repulsively slick with sweat or grease. Gamely, he made himself not withdraw it. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's not you, Tony. I wish to Christ it was. The Green Corps marched across the border today. They're burning the place, Tony. Burning it to the ground."

"Oh, come now, Walter," said Krishnamurti. "They're not burning—"

"Shut up! Mandalay, Toungoo—they'll be in Rangoon before dinner. Do you think we're stupid? Do you think we're blind?" cried Walter. "We'll stop you—by God, we'll stop your disgusting little tin Mogul. And when we're finished with him—"

Krishnamurti laughed coldly. "You'll do *what*? Little men living in a country much too big for them! We were civilized when there was nobody in Australia but the aborigines. What do you know of this? Nothing. The Aussies will do *nothing*. They will blow a great wind from the south and when the trees quit shaking, they will nod their heads and say what a

great thing they have done. While my president will march across Burma and add a *new state*. A great day, we will say. A very great—”

“*Shut your bloody face!*”

Walter lunged across the table and Krishnamurti danced away from his hand, grasped it delicately by the wrist and twisted it, pinning it against the table. A burning grin of pure malice transformed his face, and he took the arm, now bent backward against the table's edge, and slammed the wrist down with a sickening crack. Walter screamed.

“It is indeed the time of the Moguls!” Krishnamurti said in a hoarse whisper.

Walter grabbed the heavy beer mug and struck Krishnamurti in the face. Krishnamurti stood up and swayed, looking puzzled. Walter heaved to his feet and swung the beer mug against the side of Krishnamurti's head. Krishnamurti fell as suddenly and completely as an empty sack.

Antoine watched them both; the music from the night before swelled inside of him, and they seemed to be singing.

Walter sat back down and held his arm, tears falling down his face. “Christ,” he moaned in melody. “Get me some help, Tony. Get me some help.”

Antoine stood, listening to the music, staring first at Walter, then at Krishnamurti on the floor.

“You're still human, aren't you?” Walter shouted at him. “Get me some help!”

Antoine stood there, staring, until the siren introduced a new theme to the music. The ambulance arrived, called by the bartender. Both Krishnamurti and Walter were taken away.

*Kisses gave she and the ripe grape,
A good friend, trusty to the last;
Even the worm can feel pleasure,
And the Seraph stands before God.
Glad as suns that He hurtles
Through the vast spaces of heaven,
Pursue your pathway brothers;
Be joyful as a hero in victory.
Millions, be you embraced!
For the universe, this kiss!
Brothers—above the canopy of stars
A loving Father surely dwells.
Millions, do you fall upon your knees?
Do you sense the Creator, world?*

—Ode to Joy, Schiller
Extract of text, 9th Symphony,
Ludwig van Beethoven

As Sool, Iba, and Antoine walked through the City Monuments, faint flashes of light illuminated the dark night sky.

"A storm," Iba trilled in a low voice. "It is the first of many—fall is coming."

Sool made a low note of agreement.

Antoine nodded as well, thinking as they walked through the smoke of their own making how he would spend the fall.

The apartment he had been living in over the summer had grown too small. Perhaps he would take a small house near Sool's and take the train in to work.

Sool stopped before a dark figure, a male leaning back, his spine bent almost double to the ground, arms outstretched. He looked at it sadly.

"Does it have a name?" asked Antoine. Having to speak in a human tongue made him feel wretched. He longed to be able to speak, as well as understand, brownie. The best he could do was whistle a few words.

"No," said Sool, responding in brownie. "If I were to name it, perhaps I would name it Antoine."

Antoine laughed. "'Antoine bent,' maybe."

"I like that. 'Antoine bent,' indeed."

For a moment, Antoine saw the statue as himself, bent backward trying to make a new shape and only held in place by the resistance of his body. He felt lost for a moment and bitter. "Name it 'Whistle in the Dark.'"

Sool did not comment and started walking toward the amphitheater.

Iba followed. "Did you hear the program this afternoon?"

"No. I was inside."

"You'll like this. They are going to attempt to perform human music."

"No instruments, of course," Sool said. "Some of yours are—let's just say I heard that the chorus had a difficult time with it."

Antoine nodded. "I bet."

They put out their cigarettes in the urns at the entrance and walked down to their seats.

"I've only heard a small bit of your music," Sool said.

"I hope you're not disappointed."

The bell sang and stillness blew over them like a gentle wind. When all was quiet, the bell sang again, and they sat down.

Much of the concert did not touch Antoine as he listened. The chorus did not seem at ease with the music. Or perhaps, the fault lay with Antoine. Even the audience seemed restive.

The last symphony engaged them. The chorus seemed to suddenly understand this music or rediscover it, somehow. He leaned forward in his seat, listening.

For a long moment, he felt alone in his listening. Gradually, he became aware of the brownies around him, hearing in the music the deep ache of their past. He could hear the elders speaking in a low, heartsick murmur: *And are we dead? Yes we are. Yes we are.* The dead, always the dead, singing around them.

He felt dry, desiccated, his limbs felt weighed down in dust, his eyes felt scratchy and lifeless. Always, this past.

Then, a voice, singing: joy! *Be embraced! rise up!*

Without realizing, he stood. All around him, gaping, struck, the brownies were standing with him.

He felt their trembling—he was trembling himself. Sool touched him and Antoine looked up at him, saw bewilderment in his face. He turned to Iba and her face was transfixed, shining, staring down at the chorus.

Joy! Be embraced!

He cried out and it became part of the chorus, part of the song they were all singing together. He saw, before them, Kuyou step down from the dais, stand up in the front row, spread his arms toward the sky behind them, ring the bell, and Antoine, and the crowd with him, surged toward Kuyou in all directions.

"Wait! Iba—Antoine! Wait!" he heard Sool from far away. But there was no waiting, and Kuyou was standing before him, holding aloft his knife.

Yes, he cried, to be free. Take me. Take me!

Kuyou reached down to him and he was saved.

Walter found it awkward to read the news and drink beer in a cast. He swore at both of them but beyond that he held his temper. It was too difficult to retrieve the damned stein. He spread the flimsy and resumed, trying to avoid knocking over the mug.

He looked up as Sool entered the bar. After a moment's search, the brownie saw him and came over.

"Can I join you for a moment?" Sool asked.

"Free damned planet," growled Walter and resumed his reading. "Know anything about Burma?"

"Not much."

"How about Australia? India?"

"Even less."

Walter chuckled. "So if I say we're kicking the Mogul's ass, it won't mean much, right?"

"That's right."

Walter laughed again. "We are. I could have told the bloody bastard that if he'd listened."

"Krishnamurti?"

"The same. He broke my arm, but *he's* still in a coma. And I'm going home to stand charges—funny, isn't it?" He turned over the flimsy and read the other side.

"Are there many—casualties? Is that the right word?"

Walter shook his head. "Not many. A few hundred soldiers on each side. We're mostly throwing bombs at one another, and both sides are armed."

"How about non-soldiers?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "We won't find *that* out until after it's all over. You can kiss the mountains good-bye. Good-bye Rain Forest Project. The Burmese did that themselves. They always were bloody independent bastards."

Silence fell between them.

Some minutes later, Walter looked up at Sool. "You're here for a reason, I suppose. What can I do for you?"

"Is there something in there about the concert last night?"

"Some riot or something. A whole lot of dead brownies and one dead human—don't tell me." Walter rubbed his face with his hands. "It was Tony, wasn't it? Stupid, stupid!"

Sool spread his hands. "I thought you should know. He and Iba and I went to the concert. Kuyou appeared—"

"Don't give me any of that Kuyou crap!" Walter shouted. "You fucking murderous bastards can slit your own throats if you want to—but you got no right to—no right." He leaned back in his chair. "You couldn't leave him alone, could you?"

"You don't understand," Sool said softly. "He and Iba were saved. I couldn't reach them. I tried, but there were too many people. It was the music, I think. I'll just have to wait."

"You tried." Walter's voice was tired. "I tried, too. Hell, we couldn't stop him. It's a damned shame."

"You still don't understand." Sool took one of Walter's hands. Walter pulled away. "You should be glad."

"Glad? You imbecile! Why should I be *glad*?"

Sool ignored him and spoke to himself. "I missed my chance last night. Do you think that's the only chance I'll have?" His eyes seemed to come back into focus as he looked at Walter. "You wouldn't know, would you? I'll just have to wait and see. Wait and see."

Walter stared at him, aghast. "You're all crazy. Do you know that? You're all bloody stinking daft! Nothing but a fucking bunch of animals!"

Sool stood. He pulled over the flimsy from under Walter's hands and looked at it, lifted his eyes to Walter's and straightened.

"Yes," Sool said at last. "Perhaps we are." ●

An old man learns some hard
truths about himself on a
bittersweet journey to...

ONE KANSAS NIGHT

Steven Uiley
art: Laurie Harden



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It was like passing through a membrane. There was a moment of suffocating heat, and then he found himself standing beside the highway, facing west. Cars hummed past, quaint, angular things. Across the road, a grain silo sat silhouetted against a darkening sky. He looked over his shoulder, at the empty parking lot and the row of small business establishments. His companion had never been here before, or anywhere near here, but she had missed the end of Lynn's street by only two hundred yards. Impressive, he thought.

They turned in place, a mid-sixtyish man in a short-sleeved shirt and baggy trousers and a mid-twentyish woman wearing a wig of teased hair. The beauty parlor, the small post office, the laundry and dry cleaners, the grocery store, the insurance office, and the ice-cream shop had closed for the day. The evening was warm and still and filled with insect song and highway murmur.

"Christ," said the young woman. "Kansas."

"Yes," said the old man. His heart raced. He took a deep breath, willed himself calm, let the breath out as a word, "Kansas." Everything was exactly as he had remembered it.

"For some reason, I imagined Topeka'd be bigger."

He gestured northward at a broad smudge of light. "That's Topeka. This is two streets and three rows of houses, a few little stores, a primary school. I live on the second street over. We moved there from dependent housing when my father got transferred to Greenland. I can look out my bedroom window and see the flight line."

"Past tense," she said. "*Lived* on the second street over." She fussed with her wig. Young women did not shave their heads in 1965. His own hair lay on his scalp like a bristly atoll. Old men did not have Ben Franklin hair in 1965, either. "Now, which way?"

She was in too much of a hurry to suit him. He pointed at the laundry and dry cleaners and said, "I worked there part-time. The customers were mostly enlisted men from the airbase."

"Which way?"

His answer was cut off by a bass rumble so loud that it seemed to come from every direction. The air itself shook. He inclined his head toward hers. "R-B-forty-seven."

"What?"

"Jet bomber."

She made to move on, but he stood still. She could only do likewise. They listened to the roar of jet engines for several minutes. The sound receded and died away with a suddenness that appeared to take even the insects by surprise; for a moment, the night was perfectly quiet. Then she said, "It can't be like you haven't heard a jet in fifty years."

"I used to go to sleep and wake up to R-B-forty-sevens and C-one-thirties. They'd warm up for takeoff across from my bedroom window. I think sometimes they just warmed up for the hell of it. Just sat there and ran their engines."

"That kind of thing could lead to permanent hearing loss. Maybe even to brain damage."

He smiled thinly. "It was the most normal thing in the world. I grew up with Strategic Air Command."

"Surrounded by grown men who all dressed alike and saluted one another. That definitely would lead to brain damage."

Heat crept up his neck. "I really am starting not to like your attitude."

"You didn't pay me for my attitude. You paid me to bring you here. Now, go on, do what you came to do."

Little girl, he wanted to reply, little girl, I can fix you, but then he thought, No, maybe I can't. He knew everything about her, and nothing. Every person was born someplace, lived someplace. Not every person could exploit flaws in the fabric of time. He was only a passenger. She was a traveler, impossible to find if she chose not to be found.

So, instead, he licked his dry lips with his dry tongue, rubbed his fingertips against the sweat-slicked palms of his hands, and said, "Right. But I won't be hurried."

He heard her mutter under her breath, something that sounded like, must have been, *crazy old bastard*, and thought, Fume all you like. It's my nickel. This is the last of my four summers in Kansas, and the happiest. I've come fifty years to reclaim just a few moments of it, and I refuse to be hurried. He took the first deliberate step toward the darkened buildings. She heaved an exaggerated sigh of relief as she fell in beside him. They crossed the parking lot and moved along the row of façades and plate-glass windows, and he made a point of pausing to peer through each window.

"I came to Kansas with my family in nineteen sixty-one," he said, "after two years overseas. By then, I'd already lived in several states and two foreign countries. Now it's four years later, and I've lived here longer than I've ever lived anywhere else." He stole a glance at the traveler. Her face was strained in the glow of the street light. "Do you have a sense of continuity in your life?"

That made her look sharply at him.

"It seems to me," he went on, "that somebody who can do what you do, move at will from now to then—it seems to me you must lead a very disjointed life. One minute, you're hobnobbing with Mozart, the next—"

"It's not that easy. In fact, it's damned hard. And I wouldn't hobnob with Mozart on a dare."

"Well, it still must give you a very fragmented view of life."

"It's the most normal thing in the world."

They rounded the corner of the ice-cream shop. Across the alley behind the buildings, fences and old trees defined back yards patchily illuminated by light spilling through rear windows. Somewhere, a dog barked, and a human voice called to it to shut up. The old man froze.

"Listen," he said after a time, "military families are the wind over the world. Always moving, never leaving a trace. But when my father had to go to Greenland for a year, the family had to stay here. That break in the pattern of my life encouraged me to believe the worst thing a military brat can believe. That he belongs somewhere. I started to believe I belonged here. I was coming up on my senior year of high school. I knew almost everybody at school. Air Force kids came and went, but there were lots of local kids who stayed put. They helped me feel anchored. And I suddenly seemed to know where my desires and talents met and what they could bring me. I suddenly seemed to be a real American teenager, with real friends and a taste for rock music and everything. The radio played constantly while I tagged airmen's dirty fatigues. Beatles, Stones, Byrds. Dylan'd just gone electric. I heard the news, too. The ghettos were in flames, but the ghettos were far away. Vietnam was very far away and hadn't become an issue for me or most other people. We didn't believe," and he growled the words, deliberately tuneless, "we were on the eve of destruction."

His companion's incomprehension and annoyance were almost palpable.

"From a song on the radio," he explained.

"Are you going to stand here and yak, or are we—look, the longer you fart around, the harder it is for me to resist the pull of our proper matrix. I can't hold us here indefinitely."

"I just want you to understand."

"You understand. We're taking a big chance here. You're visiting your own past, and I've helped you."

He bit down on an angry retort, and they turned to the right at the end of the alley. The Moores, he thought automatically as they passed the house at the corner of the short, tree-lined block. Next door, the Emmmonses, and then the Savages. Across from them—

They stopped in a deep pool of darkness. At the far end of the street, the primary school sat bathed in pale light.

"Well?" she said.

Halfway down the block, he thought, on the left, but he could not say it. His heart was racing again. His throat was so dry that it hurt him when he tried to swallow. Lynn's house, he thought. He could not see it, only the glow of its lights through gaps in the trees. Lynn, he thought, Lynn.

The traveler moved close and slipped her wiry arm through his. He started to resist; strong fingers closed on his wrist. "This," she told him, "is the part we do strictly my way. We walk straight to the other end of the street, and I set the pace."

His heart pounded against his ribs. He was breathing hard, panting like a dog. The thought crossed his mind: What if I have a heart attack right here, or a stroke? He gasped, "Not too fast."

"Not too slow. Easy and natural. We're two locals—some old geezer and his great-great-granddaughter—out for a stroll. We don't stop along the way, we don't say a word. If we meet anybody coming the other way, you just nod, and we keep walking. We stop under that last tree at the end of the block. In the shadows, out of the light. Got that?"

He said, "Yes," and it came out as a faint hiss. Oh, he thought as they began to walk, oh my God. He moved as though the darkness had grown hands and clutched his legs and feet to draw him forward one uncoordinated step at a time. My sixteenth summer, and everything seemed at last to have fallen into place. My life was starting to make sense to me. I had, I would've sworn that I'd found true happiness, because, best of all, most miraculous of all, I had a girlfriend, sweet and lovely Lynn, and everyone at school liked her but she liked *me*, she *liked* me, *me*, of all people in the world. And she lived one street over from me, right around the block, cut through a couple of backyards and there she'd be. Waiting. For me.

He could see the house now. He could see lights burning behind the living room curtains, and through the upper half of the screen door into the living room itself, where Lynn's parents would be watching television or conversing and all the while discreetly, unobtrusively playing chaperone. Sitting close together on the porch steps, shielded from direct parental view by the screen door's louvred lower half, were two teenagers, a boy and a girl. Their faces were in shadow, but their heads were haloed with light from indoors.

Lynn and me, he thought. Lynn. Lynn. Fifty years from now, I wake up trembling and in an agony of grief at two o'clock in the morning. It isn't the memory of pain, it's the pain itself. Pain of loss. Loss of you, Lynn, and of this place and time, and of the person I'd felt myself becoming, before I was uprooted and had to start all over someplace else. And the pain doesn't go away. I tell myself, she was only a girl. I tell myself, I was only a boy. I tell myself, in the grand scheme of my life, one short Kansas summer can't have been too important. But the pain doesn't go away. Not until I realize what I have to do is find you, find out what your life has been without me, reach out and say, Hi, it's been a while, remember me? And even that little shred of continuity is denied me, because what I find out is, you die of ovarian cancer twenty years from

now, leaving a husband who is not me and children who are not mine, and all of my money and resolve and all of the cold fury that's directed and propelled my thoughts and actions for half a century can't bring you out of my past, and even as he stared the boy and the girl leaned toward each other and merged into a single indistinct form.

A kiss, he wondered, or are they, are we talking, whispering secrets, endearments? He tried to remember something, anything, he had ever said to the girl. We did talk. We talked, we did things together, went to movies at the base theater, for drives in the country with her parents or my mother. Once, we went horseback riding at Shawnee Lake. Most of the time, though, most nights, anyway, we just sat on those porch steps, held hands, and did a lot of chaste making out, until her parents called softly through the screen door that it was time for her to come in. They never came to the door, never disturbed us, but they must've known what we were up to. Not that we were up to much. Just kissing and holding hands. We were as straight as we could be. So, in she'd go, and off I'd go, cutting through the backyards, happy on the one hand and unhappy on the other but, on some very profound level, utterly content.

How easy it was, at sixteen, not to believe I was on the eve of destruction. . . .

The teenagers suddenly drew apart, though not too far apart, and turned their faces toward him like watchful cats. He realized with a start that they had noticed him. *I don't remember this.* No. Of course I don't. It wasn't anything important. I didn't, I wouldn't have remembered it longer than it took me to get back to my smooching. The old man passing in the street is only a momentary threat to privacy.

He felt a tug on his arm and heard the traveler quietly tell him not to lag and then a girl's, *Lynn's*, soft laughter.

I must've said something clever to her just then. She thought I was so clever. . . .

"Don't stare," and there was a tug on his arm again, but he could not help staring. The same invisible hands that had pulled him irresistibly along the street now turned his head to the left, toward the porch steps. I'd give everything I have, he thought to the boy and the girl, for a glimpse of your faces. I have everything there is to have, and I'd give it all.

"Eyes front," the traveler said. She pulled him forward; the unseen hands sank their fingers into him to hold him back. He took one last look. The lights of Lynn's house shimmered. Oh God. The two teenagers melted into each other and into the surrounding gloom. Oh my God. How easy it was for me to be oblivious, to put unpleasant realities out of mind. The end of August had been far away and then wasn't far away at all. My father returned from Greenland, my family was slated for rotation

to Texas, and I had known all along but chosen not to know. When denial no longer worked, I begged in vain to be allowed to remain behind for my senior year.

He began to sing "The Eve of Destruction."

His companion hissed at him to shut up and hauled him along ungen- tly. He stumbled on but would not be quiet.

"I never wrote to her after I left. I was in a rage when I got to Texas, and I stayed in a rage. The futility of trying to sustain a relationship with a girl hundreds of miles away only fueled that rage."

Ahead, the school building was an amber blur. He used his free hand to brush away a tear. Another tear immediately replaced it, and a sob convulsed him.

"For God's sake, save it for when we get back!"

They reached the tree at the end of the block. The traveler relaxed her grip on his arm, and he leaned against the bole as he felt himself begin to sag at the knees. He wiped both eyes with the backs of his hands and said, "Living here for four whole years made me forget the lesson all military brats learn. Relationships are as short-lived as mayflies. You shouldn't ever invest in relationships. I always remembered that after I left Kansas." He chuckled bitterly. "And I've never met a military brat who grew up to be any good at achieving intimacy. Though a lot of us can simulate it. I've spent five decades making money and imagining I was a happy man because a man with money can get everything he thinks he wants. A beautiful wife, then a different beautiful wife. Fine homes, cars, all the perks. Everything I wanted except what I really wanted."

"To spy on yourself kissing some girl?"

"Can't you remember, wasn't there ever a time in your life when kissing somebody was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to you?"

She made an amused sound. "Not in this life."

"Then I pity you."

"Pity yourself." Her voice was like a lash. "You've come all the way back to a piss-ant garrison town in Kansas because you never got to screw your high-school sweetheart."

"You don't know *anything*." He rested against the tree and glared at her. She put her fist on her hip and waited, absolutely unafraid of him. At last, he said, "I was never again as innocently happy as I was, as I *am* back there, sitting with that girl on those porch steps."

"We all have to lose our innocence sometime. As for being happy, are you satisfied with the execution of our contract?"

"Satisfied!" He gazed longingly down the street. He could feel the invisible hands clawing at him, trying to pull him back. "I might be

satisfied if I knew what would've become of us if I'd stayed. If I'd been allowed to have that life, that girl. We wouldn't have been the first high-school sweethearts who'd ever gotten married—"

"And lived unhappily ever after," the traveler said, "at least until you met your second-wife-to-be. You might've grown up to be some big Midwest banker or something and voted a straight Republican ticket. During lunch hours you'd hump your secretary on the desk. You'd have everybody's respect and attention, and none of their love. The life you'd have had might've been an awful lot like the life you *have* had. Now, take my hand. We have to go."

He shifted his weight onto his feet and grabbed her hand. He started to tell her that she really was an insolent little bitch, but jet-engine noise suddenly filled the night, and after it died away there were only the sounds of cars passing on the highway, and of insects singing of love. ●



A STAR-TRAVELER'S MEMOIR

I misremember wind
here where only recycled air
moans.
July was a month for
sunburns
in Earth's northern hemisphere
I think,
and a grasshopper is green.
But what is green now?—
A star's fractal rim,
memory,
lightning in a fairytale,

my Andromedan lover's hair.

—Wendy Rathbone



Mary Rosenblum

THE MERMAID'S COMB

Mary Rosenblum tells us that "'The Mermaid's Comb' is another venture into my future world of the genetically engineered 'Selkies' (see *Asimov's*, March 1994). What is the definition of human? I

keep wondering." Ms. Rosenblum's third novel, *The Stone Garden*, will be released by Del Rey in September of 1994. She is currently at work on a sequel to *The Drylands*.

art: Pat Morrissey



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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



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Actually, the orcas scattered the fish. It wasn't *entirely* the submersible's fault. Leta clicked commands, glottal-stopping outrage as she kicked her way through the twilight water with great sweeps of her long legs. Her implanted throat-mike picked up those angry clicks, transmitted them to Siri, who scissored her jaws in a dolph laugh and arrowed away to the left to head them off.

The laugh helped. Dolphins didn't take anything seriously, not selkie rage, not scattered fish. Neither did orcas, for that matter, even though they knew the limits when it came to human contact. Leta slowed her headlong rush through the blue murk, aware of the faint tightness in her shut-down lungs that meant she was overextending her gill. Stamina she had. Speed was something else. She scooped a great slow sweep of water, webbed toes spreading, hands ruddering at her sides, the tightness in her chest easing off. Dolphins had speed and stamina both. Score another black-mark for the long-dead Patrick Doyle, who'd thought he was so clever when he'd strung the selkie genome together.

He'd made them different enough that they weren't human. At least not according to the grubs on land.

Why do they hate us? Leta asked herself bitterly. Why do they *care*?

Behind her, orcas and the grub submersible diverged gently. Fuck you both, Leta thought, but she wasn't really pissed at the orcas. Not their fault that they triggered a lot of instinct in the nu-cods. Maybe Tri would breed that trait out of them. Thinking about her brother filled her mouth with a sour taste, and Leta opened it, let clean sea-water wash over her tongue, slide up against her clenched-tight trachea. Ahead, the school had slowed its panicked flight, was bunching up as their genetically enhanced schooling behavior took over. A thick pseudopod of cod bulged in her direction and she waved her sonic wand at it, broadcasting fishy discomfort until they retreated.

Out of sight on the far side of the school, Siri whistle-clicked her satisfaction, shaded with overtones of smug pride. She hadn't lost any cod, and, from the sound of her voice, had rather enjoyed showing off her style. To the orcas? A small guilt stabbed Leta. How did the wild orcas and dolphins treat their enhanced cousins? As badly as the grubs treated selkies?

Fish. That's what the grubs called selkies.

"... you got to be tuned into one of these frequencies, I know it. Hey, mermaid? You hearin' me. . . ?"

Young voice in her ear, coming in over her implant. It startled Leta, nearly made her drop her wand. A low engine hum resonated through her flesh, setting her teeth on edge. She twisted as the cod ebbed away, sculling to keep her place. "Get out of here!" She glared as the submersible cruised toward her. "You want to run the damn fish halfway across the ocean?" It was small—some kind of one-man alvin or maybe a remote. No viewport, just fish-belly colored hull, with a couple of manipulator arms folded up into recesses. Make that four manipulator arms. Some grub, out playing with the fish?

Behind her, Siri clicked in dismay. Great. Leta kicked hard, arrowed toward the faceless alvin. Her wand banged the curve of the hull with a flat sound and bounced off, jarring her arm to the shoulder.

"Ouch!" the voice yelped in her ear. A hint of laughter colored it. "Hey, I'm only partly to blame. The orcas didn't help either. Look, your fish are settling down now. Don't hit me again, okay? It hurts!"

He reached with one of his arms, rubbed the place where she'd banged him. His hand had three fingers, jointed like thumbs. Male voice. Leta sculled in place, refusing to be charmed by this little act. Some of her anger did ease off, because the cod *were* settling down again, he was right.

"I think I'm going to get a bruise." The hand extended toward her, fast as a striking eel. "Hi, I'm Arlo. What's your name?"

She didn't flinch. Quite. "Leta." She throat-spoke automatically, her trachea still clenched in underwater mode, dribbling just enough air to let her vocalize. Waste of time. Grubs couldn't understand throat-speak.

"Hi, Leta."

This one did. A little bit, anyway. The "hand" had grabbed hers, three fingers closed with just the pressure of a human handshake. Beyond that gentleness, strength, the unsettling feeling that he could crush her bones, rip her arm from her body with a single jerk. Leta shivered, stared at the featureless off-white hull. "So who the fuck are you?" she growled in throat-speak garble. "And how come you're out here? This is protected water, grub. You're trespassing."

"You're outside the court's boundary." His tone was dry as a noonday beach. "And I'm on contract to Tanaka, fish, so I can be here."

"Don't call me *fish*." Her lips shaped the hot words, filling her mouth with seawater.

"Don't call me grub."

Yeah, maybe a hint of pissed-off there, beneath that beach-dry tone. Leta laughed in her throat, the last of her anger washing away. "Okay, we're even. We've insulted each other." She looked down at his three-finger grip, pried one thumb carefully free of her wrist. "I've never seen an alvin like this before. What are you? A test pilot for Tanaka?"

"Yeah."

The razored bitterness beneath that single syllable brought her head up. What reason did *he* have to be so bitter? Before she could say anything, the other two arms reached for her, scooped her into a four-handed cradle.

"Hey!" She twisted, discovered that he wasn't holding her, was merely supporting her. "You're pretty slick with four arms. What did they do? Stick a few octopus genes into you, or are you a computer?"

"Neither." Again that flash of bitterness. "Just talented, I guess." He dropped her abruptly, retracted his arms. "Seriously, you're pretty close onshore, you know." He jerked one thumb in a very human over-the-shoulder gesture. "I saw a couple of licensed sports-fisher boats on their way into this cove. Might be a good idea to head out."

Well, he knew local politics, anyway. Leta swallowed the pissed-off words that had bubbled into the back of her throat, suddenly aware of the strong wave-surge. They *had* drifted into the cove's mouth. Rocks shadowed the water and anemones blossomed white and pale green among the crusted mussels. Yes, time to get out of here. She was in enough shit for having taken the school out beyond the marked boundaries. If she got into a fight with sporties, or God forbid, some fanatical protestor, she might end up scrubbing floors in the domes for the next month.

"I was heading back anyway." She somersaulted backward to wash a heady rush of water through her gill tunnel. "See you."

"I'll give you a hand. I'll give you four of 'em." His voice smiled in her ear. "I bet I'm as good at fish-herding as you are."

"No way!" She shot halfway to the surface, somersaulted again and doubled back until she was upside-down, face to face with the blank curve of the alvin. "No sub is better than a selkie!" She let her throat-speech become a true growl, emptying her lungs to do so. Damn. Why couldn't Doyle have found a way to do the speech thing better? She shot to the surface, gulped air, and dove again. "Where do you see from?" She banged on the hull with one fist. "I feel like I'm talking to a rock."

"That really does hurt, when you do that. I'm using a direct neural interface with this thing, and I'm wired for sensory input." His voice was quiet. "I see from all over. See those little spots? They're lenses. Hi-res. Once all the little pictures integrate, I've got pretty impressive vision. And a good on-board data system. Which is how I can translate your growling. It's a complicated interface, okay?"

That bitterness was back in his tone. No, it wasn't bitterness, might almost be . . . *hurt*. And a familiar "don't ask" note. She heard that same tone in her own voice when some grub asked something stupid about her gill, or if she could hold a fork with all that skin between her fingers. . . . Leta drew back a little, a dozen half-formed questions tumbling in her chest. She let them settle out like sand in a tide pool. "Yeah, okay . . . I'll take the help. *If* you don't scare the crap out of the cod. She touched his hull lightly, a brush of her fingers.

"Who's gonna be the judge of this little contest, anyway?" A smile warmed his voice.

"Me." She gave him an arch look. "Just don't scatter 'em." With a kick that stretched the webbing between her long toes, she darted away.

She was expecting him to hang back, maybe fumble a few stragglers back into the school, or at the worst scatter some fish. She'd meant to keep an eye on him, let him know she was watching his clumsy grub floundering. But the school didn't give her time to watch anyone. Happy with the rich feeding in the cove mouth, they bunched and scattered, sulky and reluctant to leave. Leta and Siri circled, with Siri click-whistling shrill frustration, trying to get the school moving in the direction of the Preserve. It was actually Arlo who got them started. The nu-cod definitely didn't like the engine-hum, and he pushed them along like the

tide pushed driftwood up the beach. With Siri and Leta containing the edges of the school, they made good time.

Even so, it was almost full dark by the time they crossed the black wands that made the court-defined boundary that kept the grubs away from the Preserve. The cod were moving fine now, heading for their pen and the feed dispensers. Leta let Siri take them on in, pretending that she wasn't ducking the coming confrontation with Tri.

Arlo surfaced with her, water gleaming as it runneled down the curve of his hull. The little alvin was slightly more than human-sized, streamlined and sleek. Leta drew a deep breath, inflating her lungs, briefly dizzy as blood drained from her collapsing gill-tunnel into the network of storage capillaries in her chest and abdomen. Overhead, the sky had gone deep royal blue, and a scatter of stars glittered like chips of glass. "They're so bright," she murmured, pointing. "Vega. Deneb, and Altair."

"I used to dream about working on one of the orbital platforms, up where you can almost *touch* them." Arlo's voice was soft in her ear. "Sometimes, when I'm down deep, I feel like . . . I'm there. Or I can pretend, anyway. Hey." Arlo sounded almost awkward. "It was fun. And you're right. You're quicker than I am, but I think I'm probably stronger when it comes to lifting stuff."

"I'm quick because I bend, that's all." A sad note in his voice caught at her, and Leta hooked an arm across the curve of his hull. "You're probably right about stronger. And I bet you're faster in a straight race. We're not sprinters." She drifted on her back, staring at night sky, at stars. "You really were a help."

"Thank you." He touched her shoulder lightly. "It's fun, having someone to swim with. This is a prototype, so I'm out alone a lot. And most people . . . can't keep up with me in the water."

"Grubs don't do sea very well." Leta sniffed. "Except to eat from it, shit in it, and claim they own it all."

"I'm a grub."

The quiet intensity of his tone jolted her, and she pulled away from his hand. "Yeah." She looked at his sleek hull. "You know . . . I forgot. Kind of."

"That there's a man inside? It's pretty easy to do."

This time the bitterness was aimed at *her*. "I didn't mean it like that." She kicked, rose waist high out of the water, anger and embarrassment making her gill shudder. "I mean . . . shit, you get around almost as well as I do and . . . and . . ." She glared at him. "It was a compliment, all right? I had a good time swimming with you. How come you're pissed?"

"I'm not." Bitterness still flecked his tone, like shards of broken glass. "You're the one who's pissed, not me."

Leta tossed her head, legs twitching, half-tempted to call him a snotty grub and swim away. But she didn't. Something in his tone—layered and dark beneath that bitterness—held her. "Hey, look, we're both pissed, okay? And it's silly." She looked away, her anger collapsing, glanced back at him from the corners of her eyes. "You really did help

with the fish. I . . . made a mistake letting them get so close onshore. Siri and I might have lost the whole school without you."

"Thank you." He touched the bulge of her gill very gently with one mechanical thumb.

As if he understood the gift of pride she'd just given him. As if he comprehended its value, and its cost to her.

"I found this." Another arm reached back, opened a compartment on the side of the hull. "It's perfect. Not a single spine is broken."

She touched the seashell he held out. A murex, the spiked and convoluted bulge of the ivory-colored shell spiraled into a long tail toothed on opposite sides with delicate, curving spines. "A mermaid's comb." She took it, delighted, brushed the chocolate-colored tips of the spines. "They're always broken when I find them." She pretended to comb her thick cap of dense short hair, careful not to damage the perfect spines. Arlo laughed and she grinned.

"I could show you where I found it." Shyness had replaced the bitterness in his tone. "Why don't you come meet me tomorrow? There's this neat cave, and nobody knows about it except me. It's beautiful inside, and the murex are all over the place. Just come to the Tanaka dock in Whale Cove."

"I . . . can't." She looked away from his all-seeing hull. "I mean, I'm not supposed to just go wandering off. I'll probably get grounded for a month as it is." And she didn't go into Whale Cove if she could help it. It had been a fishing town once, and maybe the selkies hadn't ended the independent fishing industry, but the Preserve and its occupants were a hell of a lot more accessible than Tanaka Pacific Corporation.

And it wasn't just that . . . that she didn't want to go into the town. "Who *are* you, anyway?" Leta winced at the sharpness in her tone, not sure where it came from, unable to banish it. "I'm tired of talking to an alvin-hull over a throat-mic. How about if you stick your head out? Let me see you?"

"Not that simple." He backed away, water swirling into small eddies in front of his retreating hull, arms folding up. "I got to open up in drydock. I'd flood myself out here, and this is a pricy prototype. They'll iron out the open-close bugs eventually, but right now . . ." His arms spread in a very human shrug. "Tanaka would be pissed if I sank this baby. And speaking of pissed . . . I'm overdue." He spread one three-fingered hand, gave her a choppy wave. "Later, maybe."

"Hey!"

But he was gone, leaving only a ripple on the surface where he had submerged. What got into him? Frowning, she stared at the dissipating ripples. Maybe he just didn't want to share his pretty toy. Maybe he was ugly and thought she'd be disgusted. Ha. *All* grubs were ugly, if he only knew it. Narrow-chested, skinny-legged, scrawny creatures, with thin straggly hair . . . Leta laughed, but it came out a little cracked. Arlo's sudden departure had stung.

Maybe he didn't like fish much after all. Not close and in the flesh, anyway.

Leta shrugged, told herself it didn't matter, because after all, he *was* a grub, and it wasn't likely she was going to run into him again. Overhead, royal-blue had given way to full dark and the Milky Way banded the sky. He had wanted to go up there, Arlo, had settled for the sea, instead. I have no choice, Leta thought, and glowered at the boundary markers. They hadn't been there when her mother was alive. She'd have hated them. Surely. Sudden guilt squeezed Leta. Siri would have brought the school into the pens by now. She flung herself into the water, trachea closing tight, gill-tunnel inflating. Tri would think she'd gotten bloody lost.

He was going to be pissed. Well, he was *always* pissed at her, these days. Leta kicked hard, eyes wide with night vision, shooting through the dark water like a spear.

The clustered modules of Briard Station were already lighted, soft and blue-green below the shifting silver interface of air and water. They climbed the basalt rim of the cove, stairstepping up the rim of the bluff above the water, powered by the ebb and flow of the tide, by the temperature gradients in the water offshore. Leta stayed below and angled south, away from the residence modules, down toward the fish-pens. The tide was running flat out now, and she kicked hard, her webbed toes spread, thigh muscles bulging. Someone had helped Siri put her school back into its pen. They were butting their stupid cod-faces into the feeders, a seething silvery mass of instinct and protein.

Are we selkies so much better? Leta killed her forward momentum with a sweep of her hands. We're about as engineered as the cod. Her hands clenched slowly, webbing jutting up between her long fingers. No, they were much more thoroughly engineered than the cod. Siri was hovering near the pen door, zig-zagging back and forth in agitated arcs. Great. "Who?" Leta clicked out. Who had upset Siri?

The dolph bobbed her head three times and whistled a rising sequence of three notes.

Tri. Of course. Leta hunched her shoulders. "Go take a break, Siri." She clicked the "see you later" phrase.

Siri bobbed again, but didn't leave. Instead, she planted her head against Leta's side, shoved her gently in the direction of the residence modules.

"Yeah, thanks. I think." Leta laughed, wondering just what the translation really was. "Ouch." She pushed Siri's sleek muscular body away. "Hey, see you tomorrow, okay?"

Siri squawked after her as Leta kicked slowly across the cove. Saying what? Leta didn't have a clue. The dolphins, for all that Tanaka bio-engineers had enhanced them, were their own people. But they belonged to Tanaka. As livestock, listed on company inventory. No grub ever argued that *they* were people. And when the World Court reaches its decision

on selkie status, maybe *we* won't be people either, Leta thought bitterly. She reached the module where she had her apartment, one of the lowest in the cove. It had an underwater entry. She came up in the middle of the entry pool and levered herself quickly onto the floor, gasping in a lungful of fresh air to deflate her gill. Maybe Tri would at least give her time for a shower. . . .

"Where the hell have you been?"

Water ran warm from the bottom of her tunnel, trickled down between her legs, puddling beneath her butt, as if she'd wet herself. Leta blinked up at her brother, taller than she, hair seal-brown instead of chestnut, wide face hard with anger. People said he looked more like their mother than she did. Leta looked away from his anger. Two or three people fresh out of the showers kept their eyes carefully elsewhere as they dried themselves or rubbed lotion onto their skin.

"Later, okay?" Her voice bounced from the humid walls, turned loud and a little too shrill by the acoustics. "Look, Tri, I'm tired."

She gasped as his hand closed hard on her upper arm, webs bulging between white knuckles. He yanked her to her feet, held her by both shoulders as she swayed, still a little dizzy from shunt reaction.

"You listen to me, *little sister*." His eyes gleamed like agate, bare inches from her own. "You took your school out beyond the markers. We didn't know where you were, or what kind of trouble you might be in. I had three people out looking for you, and Keri scanning the sat-links. Do you know what that *cost* us?"

"So why did you do it?" She wanted to yank free of his grip, forced herself to stand still. She wasn't quite sure she was strong enough, and she was damned if she'd wrestle him and lose in front of an audience. She wondered suddenly if their mother had gotten angry like this. She had only a few blurry memories of warmth, and a laugh like the sound of seabirds. . . . "If I get into trouble it's *my* problem, right?"

"You know it isn't." He shook her, one hard sharp jerk that snapped her teeth together. "It's *our* problem. And I *do* care about you, Leta." He snatched a quick angry breath. "Whether you want to believe that or not."

She looked away, a flush spreading down her gill tunnel, in spite of herself. Because he was right. It had been an irresponsible thing to do, and she might have lost the whole school if Arlo hadn't helped her. At least he didn't know about that. "Tanaka'll bail us out." The words tasted bitter as she spat them out. "Why should you worry?"

"You're nineteen, Leta. Don't talk like a kid." Tri let go of her, the lip of his gill tunnel quivering with his emotion. "We're contract labor. Tanaka doesn't own us. They won't do shit for us beyond that contract, and you know it. You get your ass busted for being where you didn't belong and *we'll* have to go bail you out." He turned away with a shrug. "I'm leaving in less than twelve hours for that Lucerne conference on fishing-rights—which is *important*, Leta. I don't need to be looking for

lost children, and I don't need your attitude. Why don't you grow up, and stop breaking rules for the hell of it?"

"You're never going to let me be anything but your baby sister, so don't give me *grow up*. Fifteen years older doesn't make you my *parent*." Leta clenched both fists, her tunnel still dribbling onto her trunks. "Why not break the rules? Yeah, I sneak out past the markers. What are we supposed to *do* in here, Tri? Move fish from one pen to the other? Train Tanaka's dolphins for them, so they don't have to use us at all? If we grazed the schools out on the shelf, we wouldn't have to pay Tanaka for the feeder-pellets. Then we could maybe do better than barely breaking even. I took that school out and it worked." Only because Arlo had been there to save her butt, and that truth shut her suddenly up, made her aware of the thick silence.

Okay, so everyone was listening, so what? "The boundary's there to keep the fanatics *out*, not keep us *in*. *You're* doing that!" She glared at Tri, so smug and sure in his shiny cloak of leadership. "You're as bad as any of the grubs, acting like we're some kind of mutations, like we ought to shut ourselves away in case, God forbid, we should upset some fat, bald sportie on a chartered yacht."

"When you're elected exec, you can change everything." Tri's eyelids drooped, and he started to walk away. "Right now, I'm running things, and Tanaka pays us pretty damn well to train dolphins. You're grounded for a week. You can do some extra shifts on housekeeping or in the pens."

He'd tuned her out again. Like he always did. Because he was fifteen years her senior, and thought he'd had to take over, after their mother had died. Because he thought she was a kid, and his thinking had made her act like a kid. Anger rose in her like a tide, scorching away all the don't-say-its, wiping out any desire to shrug and pout and let him just get on with his business of running the show.

"You sold us out to Tanaka." Her words came out soft, like the hiss of foam across a rocky beach. "Our mother spent her life busting us selkies loose from Tanaka. And you gave us back to them." Her gill tunnel fluttered. "Yeah, Tanaka pays us to train their dolphins for them. Yeah, we test equipment for them. It's a dole, Tri. We roll over and spread 'em, and they pay the rent. We could make it on our own. Do the fish right and make a profit. But we don't, because it's safer to be Tanaka's tame fish than to risk it on our own." She clenched her fists, webbing sticking up between white knuckles. "Don't you get it?" Her voice shook and she struggled to get it under control. "Everything that mattered to her, you gave away. You've fucking sold us *out*."

Tri's face went white. For a moment she thought he was going to slap her and braced herself, hot triumph burning behind her eyes. Yeah, *do* it, brother. Hit me. And then we'll all know I'm right and the only way you can answer me is with your fists. Because she *was* right, and they both knew it.

He lowered his hand, shoulders slumping, gill tunnel shuddering above his faded green trunks. "Yeah, Tanaka owns us. And yeah, we're playing

it safe. You're right." His voice was low, almost gentle. "I think most of us can accept it, Leta, even if we don't like it much. And maybe one day we'll have enough financial clout to walk out on Tanaka, tell them to eat fish shit. But right now, they could stomp us—repo the whole-damn Station if they wanted. So we're gonna keep playing it safe, rolling over for Tanaka, investing every dime we get. And yeah, we're tame fish. And it was my decision to play it that way." He bent his head and shoulders in a deep, ironic bow. "Thank you very much for throwing it in my face, little sister."

She wanted to look away, couldn't, scalded by his acceptance.

And it was my decision.

No, she wanted to yell. Everybody doesn't accept that this is the only way to do things. I've sat in on the meetings, I can add up the numbers, too. It's a risk, but we could maybe make it.

Maybe.

... it was my decision ...

She could feel the eyes on them both, and the silence squeezed her like a fist. Disapproving silence? She looked away finally, discovered that her audience of three had become seven, because selkies had this incredible ability to *know* when it was worth eavesdropping. No, not all those faces registered disapproval. Tri was standing still, his face averted. Pain, hidden beneath that careful mask of a face? Oh yeah, she could see it, and it ... shocked her.

"Shit," Leta said softly and dove into the entry pool.

Water; explosion of silver bubbles, pressure in her ears, equalizing almost instantly, gill tunnel inflating, blood shunting heady and sweet with new oxygen through her brain. ...

Pain in her gut.

She had never hurt Tri, not really, hadn't ever been able to really touch him. No one could touch him, he was so much in control, so sure of what he was doing. From their mother's death on he'd been in control, taking charge of her grief, taking charge of her. He ran the Station the same way; always in control, always so *sure* of what he was doing. Nobody could hurt him, no matter what they did.

She had just hurt him. The bluegreen water darkened as she left the lights and that darkness soaked into her soul. Night-vision gave her shadows of movement; a drowsing school of sea-trout that parted skittishly as she drove through, closed in again behind her. Squid ghosted past, glowing green-white in the dark, veering away from her in perfect unison, trailing clouds of luminescent ink as they jetted away. She was out in the off-shore current now, letting it carry her south. The lights of Whale Cove glowed like a constellation of earth-bound stars, outlining the black pool of the harbor. Tanaka's dock was in among those lights. Arlo would be asleep, perhaps, or polishing his sleek, sensitive hull. She rounded the headland, kicking hard, letting the rhythm of muscles and tendons fill her head, drown out the sound of Tri's voice.

my decision. ...

He had accepted it—all the blame she had flung in his face. Leta kicked harder, pushing her gill to the limit, until the buzz of hypoxia tunneled her vision. She hadn't wanted him to accept that blame. He had let her hurt him. He had accepted that, too. *Why?*

Something brushed her thigh . . . rock. Startled, she reared out of the water, realized how close in she was. The headland here between the Station and Whale Cove was dangerous. The waves could pound you to jelly on the rocks. She veered off, but the current had her now and turbulence shook her like an orca shakes a seal. Swallowing a sudden pang of unease, she kicked hard, scooping great sweeps of water as she struggled against the ocean's fist.

The sea was always the boss. Sometimes she reminded you of that, just to keep you humble. A wave slapped her legs aside, tumbled her head over heels in that moment of helplessness. Her knee slammed a rock and numbing pain speared up her leg. A cry squeezed its way out of her throat as a gritty welter of foam surged around her, tumbled her onto sandy beach. Gill and lungs spasmed, half in air half in water. Biochemical confusion. Gasping, struggling for breath, Leta tried to stand. Her left leg buckled and she fell with a cry, blinded by sand, slammed flat by the hard hand of the next wave. She slid across beach, trying desperately to keep sand out of her half-inflated gill. Then the water let go, ebbed gently away. Gasping, she crawled higher, webbing scraped by the rough sand beneath her palms, as battered and humiliated as any stupid grub caught in the surf.

"Hey, what the hell? Look what crawled out of the water."

"It's a fish. But it's got legs, don't it?"

"Ever see a fish with legs?"

Young voices, hard-edged and full of ugliness. Leta blinked sand and water out of her eyes, skin going tight with dread. Two men and a woman sat on a drift log, smoking dope. The pungent reek tickled her nose, mixed with the sour and musky smell of their sweat and flesh. Grubs *stank*. Another man stood less than a meter away on the wet sand.

"Hey, it's bleeding." One of the smokers laughed. "Didn't know they had red blood, did you?"

"Yeah. Ever fuck one?" He got up, doughy, thick-bodied.

"Nah. Who'd want to?"

The man standing up remained silent, not joining in. He was older, tall and thin, with dark hair in a sun-frayed tangle over dark eyes, close enough that she could see his face. He exuded a sense of *separate*, as if he didn't belong with the other three.

"She's spying on us." The woman spoke, her voice hard, not so young. "They're always spying, always sneaking around to keep us out of the ocean. If she didn't come back, who'd know?"

Her cold tone chilled Leta. Death. That's what she heard in that soft voice. The other two heard it, too. It surfaced on their faces like oil from a wreck, slick and vicious, turning their rough ugliness into something

darker. They were all on their feet now, poised, balanced on this knife-point instant that was as intimate as love, as full of violence as a storm. Leta drew a slow breath . . . and sneezed.

"Grab her!" the woman screamed, and the two men ran across the sand.

"She's mine." Dark-hair shoved the closest of the two, knocked him off his feet.

He was close enough to grab her. Leta scrambled to her feet, nearly fell again as pain and adrenaline crashed through her. She flung herself into the surf, ignoring the tearing agony in her knee, twisting as fingers raked her back. They closed on her ankle. With a cry, Leta twisted, brought her right leg up, swimming muscles bulging as she kicked.

He let go even before the blow landed, but her heel caught him anyway, slamming hard into muscle, shoving her into the boil of an oncoming wave. She heard his grunt, and then she was under water, kicking her way through the tumble and rush of the wave. Her knee stabbed her with every stroke, but the ebbing tide hauled her out into the offshore rocks, out of reach of her pursuers. Relief unfolded in her chest, disintegrated like a smashed shell as her shoulder scraped barnacle-crust rock. She fended herself off, banged her thigh on another outcrop, awkward, crippled by her nearly useless leg. Trying to protect her finger-webbing from shell cuts, she struggled to dive down below the turbulence. This time, the sea was on the grubs' side.

A hand closed on her arm. Leta cried out in her throat, twisted to kick. Her foot glanced off something smooth and hard and a hand grabbed her other arm, too.

"Will you calm down?" The voice in her ear was urgent, worried. "Just relax and I'll get us both out of here. These rocks are going to scrape hell out of my hull."

The alvin . . . Arlo. Leta blinked, the pale bulge of the submersible's hull in front of her now, nearly brushing against her. He was holding her with two of his three-fingered hands, had anchored to a rock with the other two. He let go as she stopped struggling, and the surge of motion as he headed out to sea washed across her face and through her gill. "What are you doing out here?" And then; "Thank you." Even in throat-talk the words sounded awkward.

"You're welcome. Actually, I come out here a lot when the moon's full. I like the ocean in the moonlight. I . . . saw you swimming." His voice in her ear was suddenly rough, full of similar awkwardness. "I . . . wondered where you were going. I didn't know you . . . could see at night."

"Enough to get around. Most of the time." They surfaced, drifting, him holding her so that her head and shoulders broke through the silver ceiling of the ocean. She breathed out, in, her gill not quite collapsing, her respiration slow and without urgency because of that. Overhead, the moon rode a sea of stars. A crescent, not full. Leta eyed it. "I wasn't going anywhere."

Except away from the Station, away from Tri and his hurt—an unfair

hurt because he was so *strong*. She had never been able to hurt him before, and now, he had let her do it. It had the feel of . . . betrayal.

"Those grubs on the beach . . . they wanted to beat me up. Maybe kill me." Her voice caught, snagged on leftover fear. "For no reason, except that I'm a fish." The dark-haired grub could have caught her, held on long enough for the other two to get there and help him. He'd either been afraid to grab her or . . . Leta frowned. Or he'd let her go.

"You gonna call the cops?" Arlo shifted his grip, so she could sit on one extended arm if she wanted. "Did you get a look at them?"

An edge in his voice made her look at him, but what was there to see except pale hull? Who was he worried about—her or the grubs? "They didn't do anything." She looked away, out to the distant lights of the Station. "I'm not going to report them. The cops in town will be so polite, and behind those polite faces, they'll smirk, because they blame us for everything; for the fish dying off, for the town dying, for Tanaka taking over the fisheries, for everything." The bitterness of the words twisted her lips. "And they won't know anybody who looks like those guys, never ever saw *anybody* like that around here, so sorry, honey, go back to fishville and stay off our beaches."

"Has it happened like that?" His voice was low, harsh in her ear.

"Not to me, but yeah, it happens. That's why we stay out of town. Grubs hate us." Leta looked away, struggling with anger and something that felt like tears. Because he was a grub, too. She levered over his arm, kicked hard, and cried out as pain speared up her leg. Sinking, her mouth filled with water and she choked, trachea closing, locking water in and out so that her chest spasmed with agony as she tried to cough. Hardness beneath her shoulderblades, splash of foam and air across her face. Her trachea relaxed and she gasped in a tortured breath.

" . . . Leta, are you all right?"

"Yeah . . . yes." Dizzy, she blinked, eyes full of smeared starlight and tears of pain. He was a *grub*. She kept forgetting. . . . "My knee." She clutched it. "I bruised it on a rock. Oh *damn*." She tried to laugh, coughed again. "I messed up."

"Yeah, you did."

Worry, not laughter in her ear. Movement, water washing over her, erecting her gill. It cleared the dizziness, didn't help the spasming ache in her chest. "Hey." She squirmed. "Where are you going?"

"Home." His multiple hands closed firmly on her. "Will you knock it off? It's a long way back to Briard Station." Exasperation colored his tone. "I'd be glad to be free taxi service, but I'm low on battery and the current's carried us nearly into the cove. So we go home."

Home meant the Tanaka dock in Whale Cove. Those distant lights had resolved from stars into street lights, dockside floods, house windows.

"Hey, relax." Arlo shook her gently. "We're gonna go in through the sub bay, lady. Nobody in town's gonna know you're here—not this time of night. 'Cept Eleanor. She's the doc."

"No, no way." This time she did struggle, and it got her nowhere, wasn't going to, not without serious damage to her hide. "God damn it!"

"Will you *stop*?" Motion ceased and Arlo rocked in the swell, still holding tight. "Look, what're you gonna do with a bad knee? Some stuff you can fix if you fix it pronto. Let it go and you're fucked, unless you're real rich. What are you gonna do if you can't swim, fish? You got good med coverage? What kind of desk job you gonna get, huh?"

Cold words. So hard and cold that they froze the anger out of her, left her wanting to shiver. How whole did you have to be, to pilot a fancy alvin? "Okay." It came out a whisper, rough with the fear she'd been pretending wasn't there. "Damn." The word snagged in her throat and she dug suddenly in her pouch. "It's broken." She held out crushed bits of the shell he'd given her. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'll take you to my cave. And you can find another one." He was moving again, fast enough to trail luminescent foam behind them. "Eleanor—Dr. Sharf—is cool. She's Tanaka, you're Tanaka, so she can talk to whatever doc you got out at Briard, right?"

"We're not . . ." She bit off the words. She'd thrown that in Tri's face. That they still belonged to Tanaka. And Doc Vilcek was certainly Tanaka, for all he was officially contracted to the selkies. Yeah, this Dr. Sharf could talk to him. "All right." She opened her palm, let the bit of ivory and chocolate shell wash away in the dark water. "Thanks," she whispered.

"Hey, you're welcome." His arms tightened about her almost imperceptibly.

It had a comforting feel, that pressure. Leta laid a palm against the curve of the alvin's hull—smooth, cool, it had a slight *give*, like flesh instead of metal or plastic. She stroked it gently, like you'd stroke a dolphin's flank. In her ear, the whisper of a sigh.

They were entering the cove. Leta wrinkled her nose at diesel, dead fish, and that whiff of decaying garbage that you only got around human docks. Abandoned fishing boats rocked against barnacle-crusting piers, their decks a jumble of battered fish-boxes, tangled nets, cables, and assorted junk. Rust streaked their scabby sides, and their decks were crusted with white gull-shit. In the center of the cove, bright, new-looking sport boats bounced gently, their polished flanks protected from the dock by plastic bumpers, filled with the latest tech in fish-finders, bait, quality poles and lines. Waiting for the sporties.

Only a few lights showed in the windows beyond the harbor. It had looked so crowded from out in the water.

"Whale Cove's kind of a ghost town." Arlo's voice in her ear was thoughtful. "Most of the sport fishers go north or south to the fancy resort towns to fish. I guess anyone who could leave did, and the rest kind of hang on. Lot of folks are on subsidy. That's why they hate you guys, I guess."

His words had a personal feel to them. "Did you grow up here?" She

wished he had some kind of single video eye to focus on. "We didn't take the fishing away from anyone. We don't even get to fish!"

"Yeah, I know." Again that whisper of a sigh. "Yes, I grew up around here."

"But we're so easy to blame." Leta hunched her shoulders, remembering the cold sound of death in that woman's voice. What do I *mean* to you, that you wanted to kill me? "If we . . . could make it on our own. If we farmed fish for real, had some kind of value . . . it wouldn't matter so much, what they thought or said." Tri had taken that value away from them, traded it away. "But we don't matter," she said softly. "And we're not even human. It's so easy to hate us."

His abrupt halt nearly tumbled her out of his arms. "Fuck that!" His voice growled in her ear. "Who says you're not human?"

"The . . . grubs." She pried one of his hands from her arm. "That *hurts*. Knock it off."

"It's not just the grubs. *You* say that—even kidding—and you're buying it." His grip relaxed abruptly, and he started forward again. "Don't ever say that, Leta. Not to anyone. You're human if you *want* to be human. And if you don't, you're not. We're going under. Ready?"

"I don't know if I want to be human." Leta pressed her lips together, struggling with anger and . . . an unexpected surge of tears. It was the tears that upset her. She didn't have a clue as to where *they* came from. They kept her silent as Arlo submerged. Her gill erected, blood singing in her ears as it flushed from storage vessels through the densely folded membranes that lined the tunnel, gleaming precious oxygen from the water. They were passing between concrete piers. Orange and red bouquets of tubeworms seined the tide with feathery feeding-legs. A magenta starfish slowly uncurled one thick leg in a slow-motion point. Ribbons of dark weed streamed in the tidal flow, anchored to shiny clusters of black mussels. Blue-green light filtered down and they rose toward it in a flush of silvery bubbles, broke through that fragile ceiling into yellow light, dank air, and the echo of a poorly designed entry bay.

"Arlo?" A woman squatted at the metal-mesh walkway that lined the entry pool. She wore shorts and a T-shirt beneath a yellow windbreaker, and she had a hurried air, as if she'd run back for something she'd forgotten. "It's late. When I got back from town, Security told me you'd gone out. Hello." Distracted, she raised an eyebrow at Leta. "Who are you?"

"Leta." Leta looked away, fishing for words. She couldn't think of what to say around grubs. "I . . ."

"She's hurt, Eleanor. She banged up her knee on a rock."

Shit, he was going to tell this woman about the attack on the beach. Leta stiffened, fear a metallic taste in her mouth. This competent woman would call the cops, and make a nice official fuss.

"I was afraid she'd really mess it up if she tried to swim home, so I sort of kidnapped her. Leta, this is Eleanor—Dr. Sharf."

"Kidnap with permission, I hope." The woman's smile warmed. "Arlo,

you could just about start an international incident messing around with aquatics." She squatted on the edge of the walkway, and held out a hand to Leta. "How bad is your knee? Should I get someone to carry you?"

"No. Thanks." Leta grimaced. Dr. Sharf had a Nordic face, still full of youth and life beneath her graying hair. Athletic body. "I can walk." The idea of a grub *carrying* her made her squirm.

"My office is right here at poolside." The doctor's crooked smile suggested that she'd read Leta's expression. "I'm sort of Arlo's private physician, you see. How you rate, eh kid?"

"Only the best for us test-pilot jocks." Arlo unfolded one arm to its full length, touched the doctor's knee. "Sorry I was out so late. You gonna catch shit?"

"Probably." She lifted one shoulder in a lopsided shrug. "Don't I always pitch it right back?" She bent to pat his hull gently, almost tenderly. "Can you manage the ladder, Leta?"

"Yeah." Nice lady. Arlo's friend. Leta grabbed the plasteel ladder bolted to the rim of the pool. She winced as she tried to put weight on her leg, closed her eyes and clung to the ladder as her gill drained. Water ran across her bare breasts, trickled down her rib-cage, giving her a sudden and intense sense of *naked*. Arlo hadn't made her feel that way. Maybe because she'd met him in the water. Maybe because she'd never seen one square centimeter of his face or flesh.

"You okay?" Arlo's worry in her ear.

"Yeah, yes." She climbed up a step, careful not to snag her long toes on the wide step. Her webbing bunched up and she slid her foot forward and back to smooth it out before she put weight on the ball of her foot. Awkward. Always awkward on land.

"Listen, I'll hang around here and take you home, okay?" Arlo's three-fingered touch on her back was gentle. "After Eleanor's checked you out."

"Arlo, you need to sleep sometime." The doctor frowned. "We've got those test dives scheduled tomorrow, remember? Early."

"Yeah, well, I'll get a couple of hours." He rocked the alvin in the water, raising small choppy waves. "I do fine with a couple of hours."

"Yeah, yeah, I know better than to try and mother you." She took Leta's elbow as she cleared the top of the ladder. "Let's go take a look at your knee, okay?"

Cheerful tone, and the doctor's hand under her elbow took the weight off her bad leg without being obvious. Leta hobbled across the mesh with her, frightened by how little weight her leg wanted to support. If the woman hadn't been helping her, her leg would have buckled. Permanent damage? Leta shivered, pushing back the images that wanted to come crawling into her brain, concentrating on the sharp edges of the mesh that pinched her folded toe-webbing, the harsh glare of light, and Dr. Sharf's firm touch.

The doctor's office reminded her sharply of the Station clinic. Exam table, scale, bio-monitoring systems. All it lacked was the big tank for

running gill-function tests. Leta boosted herself onto the table, the bottom of her gill tunnel bulging over the top of her blue swim trunks. She caught herself as she started to fold her arms across her chest, laid her hands carefully on her thighs.

"Yelp if it hurts too much." Dr. Sharf spread her fingers across Leta's kneecap, took hold of her leg with the other hand, and flexed it gently.

"Ow!"

"Hopefully just a bruise." The doctor frowned. "Let me scope it, and then we'll know. Want to slide back on the table?"

Leta let the doctor lift her legs up onto the body-temp steel (nice touch, that warmth. She wished Doc Vilcek had it in his clinic). The small bioscope pulled down from its ceiling track, its scanning heads spidering around her knee at Eleanor's deft touch. Leta lay back, her gill tunnel twitching with uneasiness; the doctor disappeared into the next room.

"Just tissue trauma." Dr. Sharf returned smiling. "Nothing permanent, if you give it a rest for a couple of days. I'll hit it with anti-inflammatories, and put a brace on it. And you've scraped up your shoulder pretty badly. Shell cuts? I better clean those up for you, but I'm not going to give you any painkillers." She bustled around, collecting items from cupboards and drawers. "I accessed the Tanaka data-file on you aquatics. Considering your biochemical difficulties with those classes of drugs, you're better off without." She gave Leta that lopsided smile again. "A little pain is an effective reminder to take it easy, anyway." She sprayed a light, oily mist on Leta's knee. "Anti-inflammatory."

The liquid tingled briefly. Leta caught her lip between her teeth as Eleanor wrapped her knee neatly and quickly. She *was* going to need a ride home.

"I'll give Arlo a call." She turned to a terminal screen set into a desk, touched it. And frowned. "Darn it, he's gone. That kid." She smiled over her shoulder. "I'll have Security run you home."

"He's not there?" Leta blinked at the screen, her belly full of unexpected dismay. "I thought . . ." She bit off the words. Why should he wait? He had tests in the morning.

"Arlo's such a kid sometimes." Dr. Sharf's face was full of sympathy. "I think his . . . physical limitations . . . have done a lot more emotional damage than he's willing to deal with. Sometimes he acts younger than he is."

Physical limitations? Leta swallowed. She had wanted to ask about Arlo—what he was like. How he had ended up piloting the alvin for Tanaka.

If he was whole? Was that what she wanted to ask?

Yeah, maybe, and it made her suddenly, intensely uncomfortable. That she had maybe been wanting to know if he was crippled or deformed inside that touch-sensitive hull.

"Something wrong?" Dr. Sharf was looking at her.

"No." Leta squirmed, wanting to be home suddenly, back in the Station, even if it did mean facing Tri.

"Good." Sharf sighed. "That alvin is Arlo's life. He doesn't have anything else. I don't know what would happen if he had to give it up." She met Leta's eyes briefly, looked away. "I'll roust Security, and somebody can take you home."

Pride in those eyes, and love? For Arlo? And something else; a flash that came and went too fast for her to identify it. Leta hunched her shoulders.

"You could call someone." Dr. Sharf was smiling again—a sympathetic smile. "Sorry about Arlo. I'll scold him tomorrow."

"I'll . . . take the ride, thank you." Calling somebody meant getting Tri, and Leta didn't want to spend an hour in the privacy of van or herding sled with Tri. She didn't want to explore the hurt she'd so unexpectedly handed him.

No, that wasn't quite it. She didn't want to explore the *reasons* for that hurt.

"Thank you." Smile for the lady, because you owe her at least that. "For this." Leta touched her bandaged knee. "And for the ride."

"You're welcome." Dr. Sharf met her eyes again. "I hope the knee doesn't give you too much trouble."

You don't like fish, Leta thought, and then wondered why she thought that.

Tri didn't show up to yell at her when Dr. Sharf's uncommunicative Security guard dropped Leta off at the landward entrance to the Station. His absence was a statement, because he knew by now where she had been and what had gone on. Dr. Sharf had accessed the Preserve's database directly, had actually messaged Doc Vilcek.

Doc Vilcek showed up in the pretty, PR-decorated entry foyer, fresh from bed with his new lover, full of fury and concern. Fury, because the good Dr. Sharf hadn't given her anything for pain. Concern for her functionality. And for *her*. She let him fuss and grumble and reexamine her, angry at Tri because he was ignoring her, treating her like a disobedient kid again.

Which was about how she had behaved. And beneath that anger at Tri lurked . . . hurt.

Why *hurt*? She didn't want to pry into that one, was relieved when Doc patched her with something that instantly banished all pain from her knee and made her sleepy as well.

So she got a sound sleep, which was a good thing, because she woke to a terse note from Tri on her terminal telling her she was on kitchen duty for a week, and that he was off to the conference in Lucerne. And that she was confined oceanside, to the waters within the perimeter boundary. He didn't even say good-bye.

So.

Leta glared at the black-spotted squashes piled on the rickety flea-market card-table. Kitchen-duty meant Li, grub, chef, and Doc's new

lover. The chef wasn't much older than she, but he acted like the difference was at least a decade.

And she couldn't swim. Not even inside the boundary. Oh, she could, but Doc had read her chapter and verse of what she was risking if she did, and swimming inside the perimeter markers wasn't swimming anyway. No more than the penned cod were swimming. They were just *there*, inside their cages. Leta picked up two of the long green squashes, wrinkled her nose at their overripe softness.

Tri had grounded all the selkies to the same perimeter when he had accepted Tanaka's contract. He'd penned them all, turned them into nothing more than sophisticated versions of the engineered fish, eating at Tanaka's feeders.

Leta grimaced and set the squash back on the pile. She didn't like vegetables and she hated squash.

"Yo, mermaid. Nice day, huh?"

Leta turned slowly, her hair standing up all the way down her neck, clear down to where it ended between her shoulderblades. *Him*. The dark-haired man from the beach. The one who'd grabbed her. He stood in a patch of empty space between a woman selling home-made jam from a tattered quilt, and a curtained booth offering porno videos for ten cents a peek. Shirtless and muscular, he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans and grinned at her.

Leta drew a slow breath, aware of the bustle of the local flea-market around her; laughter, taut barter, a snatch of song from some market-place performer. A man shoved through the curtains of the booth, his round, sweaty face glazed and remote. She caught a rank whiff of his scent, but it didn't mean anything. She was alone. A twinge of panic fluttered her gill. This town was a different world, an alternate universe, and she was nothing but a transparent overlay on sun and dust and overripe squash. Nobody really *saw* her. They merely saw a fish. He was watching her, a trace of amusement in his eyes. He knew it too—that she was powerless here. Outsider. Not-tribe.

Well, sometimes you find your own power. "You prick." Leta met his dark eyes. "You think you're safe here, don't you?" Rage was rising like a cold tide inside her, and she let it rise; rage at Tri who hid behind the perimeter fence that Tanaka penned them with, rage at Dr. Sharf with her pleasant voice and eyes that looked elsewhere. Rage at Arlo, who had talked like a friend and hadn't been after all.

She had hurt Tri, without even trying. Which was power, in a way. She hadn't wanted that kind of power, and this asshole stared at her, grinning, knowing that she couldn't even insult him without bringing half the market down on her head. She walked up to him, one foot after the other coming down softly on the hot sticky asphalt. "You son of a bitch." She stared into his eyes, black as any selkie's. "You were such a tough-guy on the beach with your buddies." People were noticing, staring, beginning to edge closer. Scenting blood? She could smell them; rank

and scary. Dangerous as a pack of feral dogs on the beach, tense as a storm brewing, full of thunder and lightning.

From the corner of her eyes she spotted Li, basket of vegetables in his hands, looking scared to death. Just wait a bit. She smiled at him, turned that smile on the dark-haired grub, let it become bared teeth. We've still got *that* primate gene, grub. I'm still your cousin, like it or not. . . . "Well, are you a tough-guy?"

"Am I?" Amused.

She slapped him. Backhand, knuckles bruising on his cheekbone, shoulder muscle behind it, doing it *right*.

His head jolted back, but he caught himself, didn't stumble, blinked fast for a second. Fire blazed in those agate eyes, molten heat, white and hot, focused on her face. Then he relaxed, suddenly and all at once. He looked around, grinning at the eyes, center of that storm, lightning rod, ready to bring it all down.

And laughed.

"Not bad." He looked her up and down, the mark of her hand darkening from white to dusky red on his sun-browned skin. "If you had shoulders to match those thighs you'd have laid me out." He raised one thick eyebrow. "Buy you a beer?"

Leta's fingers twitched with the urge to slug him again. She sucked in a breath, realizing that people were moving again, sneering, commenting, just drifting away because there wasn't going to be any blood after all. The threatening storm was dissolving, blowing away on the wind of that laugh.

It came to her, suddenly, that some of the nasty comments were directed at *him*.

He could have slugged her back, and the crowd would have jumped in on his side, maybe beat the shit out of her. She would have lost, not him. Again, she had the sudden sense that he had let her go.

"So?" He winked. "Want that beer or not?"

"I . . ." She hunched her shoulders, wanting to hate his guts, not quite able to do it. What the hell *was* his game? "Yes." She let her shoulders slide into a relaxed slope, answered his amused stare with a cool smile. "You can definitely buy me a beer."

He must have expected her to scuttle away, because his surprise showed before he hid it. "Right this way." He grinned again, but his eyes were thoughtful.

Side by side, they strolled across the crowded market. "You're lucky I didn't kick your kneecap off, the other night," she said softly.

"You almost did." His grin refused her little challenge.

"You hang out with some real assholes."

"I hang out with a lot of people." His face went suddenly still. "Beer's over here." He steered her toward a man selling mugs of homebrew from kegs stacked in his battered pickup. "You picked a bad place to go beach-combing," he said as he pulled a wad of crumpled scrip from his pocket.

"It's my fault, you wanted to rape me?" She spat the words at him.

"Yeah, we should stay inside our nice fence, right? Then we'll be safe. Secure."

"Don't knock security." His eyes brooded. "Two," he said to the sun-burned man who was selling the beer. "I'm Dane, by the way." He handed her a clouded plastic mug that dripped foam.

No way he got her name. Foam ran over her fingers, and she sipped without answering. Bitter, a little yeasty, but not bad. He was older than she'd thought—early thirties maybe. "Why don't you like us?"

"You fish, you mean?" He shrugged, frowned into his beer. "I don't like you or dislike you. You're just there. Tanaka's trained dolphins." His tone wasn't hostile, was almost matter-of-fact. "Tanaka did the politics that bought them the world ocean, not you." His eyes were cold now, wet-agate hard. "You know how much power Tanaka has? Maybe they take care of you, but they don't give a shit about anybody else. Especially anyone who might want a share of their private ocean. They sure don't give a shit about anybody stupid enough to try and fish in their ocean."

Trained dolphins . . . she had said almost the same thing to Tri. Leta met his cold eyes. "They don't take care of us," she said softly. "They own us. Because we're a potential PR risk. If they own us, they can control us."

Something flickered in the depths of his eyes. Surprise again? "So, you sold out." He swirled the beer in his mug, his eyes full of challenge. "Why bitch now?"

"Mostly we don't bitch." She looked down at her own half-full mug, suddenly ashamed for Tri, for his burden and his fear. "It's safer to be owned," she said softly. "We know we can make it, this way. Like you said . . . don't knock security." She lifted the mug, drained the tepid beer. It didn't scour all the bitterness from her throat, but it helped. "Thanks for the beer." She set the mug down on the pickup's fender. "And fuck you."

She turned her back on him and walked straight through the market, making her knee take her weight, because she was damned if she was going to limp in front of this grub, not caring that she was supposed to be shopping for vegetables, that she was going to get in trouble. She needed privacy. She needed space from this man with his agate eyes and bitter truths. She needed the ocean.

The fleamarket ended at the main street along the cove. Beyond it, docks jutted into the protected water. Leta finally let herself limp as she crossed the street, wanting the feel of water on her skin with a need like pain. She had dressed for town in a shift, wore simple slip-on shoes, specially made for selkie feet. She kicked them off now. Shoes were the ultimate denial of what you were. Her feet had been designed for swimming, not walking. The arches were too long, were muscled to spread her webbed toes, not bear weight. She winced at the sting of sun-hot asphalt on the soles of her feet, kept an eye out for broken glass. Cut toe-webs took a long time to heal.

She climbed up onto the end of a floating dock that jutted out into the

bay, walked past several small local boats. The dock rocked on the small chop, planks groaning with tiny voices, blistered bows banging against the frayed wood. Sea-smell wrapped her, damp, dank here with diesel and dead fish. The smell brought back her night swim, unrolled that dark beach, Dane's clutch at her ankle and the gentleness of Arlo's mechanical arms around her. They were so different, but ultimately . . . similar. Leta sat down on the very end of the dock, the hem of her shift catching under her butt, collar tightening across her throat. She yanked the fabric free, hating it, claustrophobic in its folds. Weird man that Dane. Hostile, but that hostility wasn't directed at *her*, *selkie*. He had let her go that night. On purpose.

It came to Leta, suddenly and with incredible clarity, that Dr. Sharf disliked selkies a lot more than Dane did. Which was crazy, because Sharf had been a lot nicer than Dane.

The lip of her gill tunnel fluttered beneath the confining shift. Leta crossed her arms on her raised knees, thighs squeezing her collapsed tunnel, chin on her forearms. Houses clustered on the low arms of land that sheltered the cove. Abandoned now, trashed by the violent storms that the warming global climate kicked up, they looked almost solid in the hazy afternoon light. For a moment, she had the sense that if you knew how to look, you'd see kids out playing, men and women maybe sitting on their porches, drinking beer and bitching about the weather, the price of rock cod, and the Japanese factory ships off the coast. Leta shivered. Maybe yesterday never really went by, just sort of got lost under the bright new layer of today.

Selkies didn't have many yesterdays. She shaded her eyes against a stab of sun reflecting from some broken glass, or maybe a window from long ago. How much human past is carried on the genome? Does yesterday get written in amino acids, like the code for an otter's toe webbing, or a seal's subcutaneous fat? Leta spread her fingers, held her hand up to the sun, so that light glowed through the stretched skin of her fingerwebs. Maybe that was what made them alien, made the grubs bare their teeth. Not gills, not webbed digits, a different smell, or fur instead of hair.

Maybe it was that lack of yesterdays.

"Well, hello there."

Familiar voice in her ear, arch tone, that archness hiding . . . anger? Leta looked over the end of the dock, pissed and happy to see him at the same time, a little surprised at the confusion of those feelings. "Arlo?"

"Yeah, me." The alvin's pale hull surfaced in the scummy water just beyond the dock. "I thought going anywhere near town made you break out in hives."

Pissed-off tone, pissed-off words, his anger right out in the open now. Leta rocked to her knees, caught her breath at a stab of pain, shifted her weight to her good knee. "What's with you?" She leaned out over the weathered end of the dock, forgetting that there wasn't anything to see; no eyes, no expression, just that pale curve of hull bobbing in the shadow

of the planks. "So hello already, and how are you?" And that midnight swim had meant nothing—no sudden friendship, just misunderstanding. "Look, I've got to get back." She gathered her weight onto her good foot.

"Yeah. So I'll see you around, huh? Sure." He backed suddenly, sending a small wave curling through the scum of trash beneath the pier. "You're pretty damn quick to take off, aren't you?"

"What do you mean by that?" Poised to walk away, she hesitated. A funny note beneath that pissed tone? Hurt? "How come you're mad at me?"

"Did I say I'm mad?" He sloshed another wave into the pier's shadow. "Hey, not me. I spend half a fucking night waiting to give you a lift home, just to find out that you took a taxi. Why should I be mad?"

"What?" Wanting to laugh, hurt—no, make that *pissed*, she lay flat on the sun-warmed planks, gill squashed uncomfortably flat, leaning out over the water. "Hey, *you're* the one who went to bed; I didn't want to ride home with that stinking security guard."

Silence. He rocked gently side to side. The movement had a thoughtful feel to it. Leta clenched her teeth, pillowed her chin on her clasped hands and waited for him to get tired of doing it.

"How late were you there?"

"I don't know." Leta shrugged. "An hour? Dr. Sharf looked for you."

"No way, lady. I finally called her to ask if she was doing fucking surgery and she said you'd left."

"Because you weren't there to give me a ride."

"Bullshit."

Stalemate, and a silly one at that. I did, you didn't. . . . Leta smothered a sudden impulse to laugh, wanted to kick him. "Look, either I'm lying, or you're lying, or Dr. Sharf is lying." *Did* Dr. Sharf really dislike selkies? "Make up your mind, okay?"

Silence. He'd stopped sloshing water around, rocked like a driftwood log in the lap of the wavelets. Leta crossed her legs, releasing her squashed gill, waiting.

"I thought. . . ." Not a quiver in him now. He lay still in the water. "I figured maybe Eleanor told you. About me—what I am inside here. I thought you were ducking me."

Low voice in her ear, breathy with admitted hurt, whose depths made her think of deep-water darkness. Leta stared at him, comprehending suddenly. "You mean. . . ." She tried to laugh, swallowed it because it would come out twisted. "You mean? So you *are*. . . ." She ran into a dead end of tumbled, clunky words.

"Yeah, I am." Tightlipped sound to his voice.

The sound of a door slamming.

Leta stripped off her shift, hot sun stinging her shoulders. She rolled it up, stuffed it into the waistband of her trunks and swung herself carefully over the splintered edge of the dock. To hell with the shoes. Scummy water closed over her head, and she suppressed a shiver as

something flaccid and plastic wrapped briefly around her wrist. Surfacing, she draped an arm over the not-quite-hard curve of his hull. "Will you give me a ride home?" Her voice faltered just a hair. "Please?"

"Sure." Wary tone in his voice. An arm folded around her, its touch as wary as his voice. "I've got plenty of battery, this time. How's the knee?"

"Wrecked, if I swim home. Li is going to tell on me for skipping out when I'm supposed to be shopping. Or maybe he won't. He's not too bad."

"For a grub?" Dry tone.

"For a grub." She pulled herself higher onto the alvin's hull, her gill pressed flat again, but that was okay because she was breathing air.

"Tell me about history, Arlo."

"Mine, state, national, or global?"

"Human." She laid her cheek against the hull as he angled across the center of the cove. "Tell me what it's like to have a past that goes back five thousand years."

"I don't know." He rocked gently, taking advantage of the tidal rip. "What *is* it like to have a past?"

"I'm not joking." Yeah, there was faint give to whatever the alvin was made of—not as soft as flesh, not mammal-warm but somehow alive. "I don't have one. Not much of one, anyway. Tell me about yours."

Silence for one heartbeat, two, five. . . . "Past." More silence. "Our dad was one of the last commercial fishermen to hang on around here." Arlo's voice was low and soft in her ear. "Tanaka kept raising the private-license fees and finally he couldn't pay them. He went out fishing anyway."

"And went to jail?"

"No. He died in a storm. That was the report anyway. My brother was fifteen. Old enough to get federal subsidy as an adult, to at least make out on his own. But he was old enough to feel like he had to take Dad's place." Sigh like the sea's breath in her ear. "I was four. We survived, end of story. Is that enough past?"

Silence in her ear now. That silence had the feel of a cliff-edge, a precipice that she could topple over, fall into cold empty space. And he had posted warning signs all along it.

Well, she was awfully good at ignoring boundaries. "So what happened?" She spoke softly, almost throat-talking even though she was breathing air. "To you. Between then and now?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Not a casual question, this. Do I? They had crossed over the bar and Arlo sledged up and over the swell. She could just see the domed modules of Briard beyond the headland. They were so close to the town, and so incredibly distant. It's like that with Tri and me, she thought with sudden clarity. So close, and such distance between us. "Tri's like that, too. He thinks he has to be my father, as well as my brother. Or maybe he's trying to make me into something better than himself." That was a scary thought, and she wasn't quite sure why. Leta touched the hull that hurt him when you banged on it. Fetal-tissue grafts? Direct neural interface?

"I want to know who you really are in there. Because . . . you're my friend." Leta shivered, because it was true, and it made her realize how lonely she was—how much distance there was between her and everyone else. Because I can't *pretend*, she thought. I can't pretend that everything is all right when it isn't. And she suddenly wanted to cry. "You are my friend," she said softly. "I don't know why."

Silence in her ear. They weren't balancing on the cliff edge anymore. She had jumped over, was maybe about to fall hard. Arlo had changed course, was heading for the tiny inlet between the town and Briard.

"Eleanor and I are friends." Arlo's tone was meditative, a low burry murmur in her ear. "You've figured it out, right? That I'm probably . . . crippled or something. And that's why I'm doing this alvin/interface thing?"

She didn't answer, merely nodded, her cheek sliding against his sleek, artificial flesh.

"I've known her since I was six. Hey, the project looked like a good deal compared to the relief camps, right? My brother thought so, anyway." Bitterness clouded his tone again. "There were three of us at first. Eleanor says that it was a mistake to start with older kids, that the sense of physical self had already gotten too restricted for the interface to really work. By the time Tanaka pulled the R & D money when I was fifteen, I was the only one left. It hurt Eleanor, when the project ended. Oh, they keep paying her salary and mine, and Eleanor keeps running tests, refining the interface. But it's over." His choppy back-and-forth rocking had the feel of shrugging shoulders. "Someone decided a human/alvin interface wasn't practical." His dry laugh tickled her ear. "Maybe that's why we ended up in Whale Cove, next door to our immediate competitors. Maybe this is the Sargasso Sea of lost and abandoned projects."

Such bitterness behind that dry tone. And she suddenly realized why Tri had let her gut him, why he had taken the safety and security Tanaka had offered.

Because they *were* abandoned. They were rejects, discards, not good enough. And that could seep into your cells and your bones, flow through your blood into your brain. Into your soul. Until you believed it. That you weren't good enough.

Leta shoved off his back, dove, somersaulted and surfaced in front of Arlo, shaking water from her eyes. "This is *our* world." She planted her palms on his sleek bow, tugged by the surge of water flowing through the inlet. "We can live down here; us, *you*. Tanaka doesn't care about living here. They don't care about the sea's *soul*. They only care about fishing rights, an ice-mining monopoly, or good quotas on the krill harvest. They're *grubs*, Arlo. You're not a grub." Her voice trembled. "We don't matter much to them. So what?" She spread her hand on his hull that might be his real flesh. "The guy who designed us, Patrick Doyle, he was a genius. And he didn't get everything right, but he cared. I *know* he cared." Her mother had told her, and she was Patrick Doyle's daughter, crafted from his own DNA, his inheritor.

"He cared," Leta said softly. "He loved the sea, and he wanted to give it to us. We belong here. We selkies. You. Only the sea gets to judge us. Not Tanaka."

"You're so sure." Breath of a whisper in her ear.

Was she? Leta fingered the texture of that certainty. "Yeah, I'm so sure," she said softly. And Tri would maybe never share that belief, had maybe bought into Tanaka too deeply. Leta let her arms relax, let Arlo's bow nudge up against her, push her gently through the water.

"I want to show you something." He unflexed his forward arms, cradled her against his artificial flesh. "Nobody knows about this but me. And now you." He dove, sinking through blue-green light into sudden shadow, into the suck and drag of current. They rose again, darkness becoming light, drifting gently toward that silver boundary between air and water. Anemones bloomed on the rocky wall beside them; pink, white, pale green. Orange sea-stars clustered, and a single perfect mermaid's comb gleamed like carved ivory atop the slow flesh of its molluscan creator. Water foamed around the hull, and they surfaced into dim light.

The cave arched upward to a nearly perfect dome, meters above them. Near the top, light seeped through a rocky opening. Leafy branches filtered sunlight, muted it to a soft cathedral glow. Leta leaned an elbow on a rock ledge that jutted from the wall. "This is beautiful." Tiny limpets, pearly white, crusted a miniature pool trapped on the rock's surface. A hermit crab waved translucent black-banded legs from a periwinkle shell. Leta picked it up, smiled as it scuttled across her webbing and back onto the rock. "Thank you for showing me this."

"You're beautiful." Arlo's voice murmured in her ear. "You belong here. In the water. That's part of the beauty."

Beautiful? Leta looked up, startled, because she couldn't remember anyone ever saying that to her before. We don't think of ourselves as beautiful, she thought, and a terrible sadness filled her.

"What's wrong?" Arlo touched the lip of her half-erect tunnel, tracing the pink fringe of gill-membranes with one finger.

"We see ourselves with grub eyes." She touched a small anemone, watched the salmon-colored tentacles curl inward. "We see ourselves as fish. Are we ever going to be *people*, Arlo?"

"I don't know." His fingertip slid across the curve of her gill, brushed her small breast.

Leta closed her eyes as he traced the arch of her broad ribcage. His touch slid down across her trunks to where thigh joined hip, followed the powerful curve of muscle. She shivered, drew in a slow breath.

"I wish. . . ." His whisper trailed away in her ear.

I wish. . . . Yeah. She laid her cheek against the curve of hull that wasn't his flesh and was. "I want to see you, Arlo. You. The inside, flesh person. Can I come back to the dock with you?" She stroked his hull lightly. "Right now?"

"No!" He shuddered, arms retracting, tucking back into their rests. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so sharp. Maybe some other time, okay?"

Maybe never. The wall in his voice was hard and high, and maybe didn't have any doors in it. Leta sighed as he eased away from her, treading water, full of grief, full of loss for something that had maybe never existed. "Some other time, sure," she said, and smiled to let him know that it was okay. Really. "I'd better get back, so they don't think I've been kidnapped or drowned or whatever."

"Okay."

She heard an echo of her own sadness in his voice. Sometimes you can know what you want, but it's still out of reach. Sometimes forever. She sighed, clung to his folded arms as he dove once more into the connecting tunnel. "I won't tell anyone about this place."

"Thanks," he said. "That dome isn't all that stable. One of these days, I'm going to come here and find nothing but a big pit full of rock and dirt and water."

"I hope not."

He didn't answer her, didn't say anything else as he drove through the water toward Briard.

He surfaced just inside the bar, and his startled cry brought her up out of the water like a breaching orca. Fire on the bluff. Black smoke twisting thickly skyward. Briard *burning*, and Arlo was grabbing at her, his voice a garbled shout in her ear. She fought free, bruising her gill against his arm, toes spreading as she kicked for home.

Pain stabbed through her leg, skewing her sideways in the water, pulling her under.

"... will you *let me*?" Arlo scooped her up.

"Hurry!" She climbed onto the curve of his hull, flattening herself to cut resistance, reason surfacing through the panic, steadying her with a cold distance.

"What is it?" He was moving fast, boil of blue-green in their wake.

"What's burning?"

"Storage." Oh God, don't let it spread to the residence. A chopper was coming in. Fire-fighters? She tried to remember if tiny little Whale Cove owned a fire chopper. The small craft dropped toward the smoke plume, hovered. "That's where we keep food and stuff. The fish-processing plant is part of it. . . ." She caught her breath, fear squeezing her. "Oh fuck, *fuel!*"

Thunder answered her. Rising ball of black smoke, bursting open to release orange hell. Percussion punched her, rocked them in the water. Numb, Leta watched the fireball lick toward the copter, watched it falter and fall—like a toy, tossed out of heaven. It hit the water and sudden flame licked upward to meet the inferno on shore. Leta's cry was lost in the roar of burning fuel.

Arlo was veering away from the fire, driving through the water like some sporter's fancy boat, past the boundary markers, heading for the residence. Everything intact. No fire. Selkies crowded the rocks between storage and habitat, and sleds maneuvered offshore, spraying white streams of seawater onto the burning buildings. On the far side of the

cove, the wreckage of the copter had already disappeared, and another boat was spraying fire-suppressant foam on the flaming fuel.

Leta clung to his hull, sickened by the destruction, horrified on some deep level. Our home. It's all we have, in all of human history. Just these few buildings. This was their entire past, burning. She stared at the residence modules as if she could protect them with her gaze. We are so *new*, she cried silently. Our race. Our species. We have no roots.

Which makes us so fragile. So unwilling to risk the little we have. Oh Tri, I think I understand. . . . "That way." She pointed, "*Hurry, Arlo.*"

Arlo veered toward the entrance tunnel, water churning in front of his bow, trailing a wake of foam. As they changed course, Leta's eyes narrowed. Someone on the cliff? Climbing. She squinted, shading her eyes against the sun—two figures, one climbing, one at the top of the cliff waiting. It was a man at the top—his dark hair glinted in the sun and he turned his head, as if he felt the touch of her eyes.

Dane. She was sure of it, even at this distance. He looked down, not aware of her after all, stretched out a hand for the blonde climber. Pale hair flashed in the sun—the woman from the beach? Yeah, she'd seen her somewhere. . . . "Look!" Leta rose almost to her knees, fingers stabbing the air. "Up there? Do you see? Quick!"

"See what?" Hint of cold in Arlo's tone, and he angled away from the cliff-face.

"There! Damn it. . . ." They were gone. Dane had hauled the woman up to the rim, had vanished. "I saw them." She clenched her fist, didn't pound on Arlo. "I saw *him*, and I know who he is. . . ." He must have been on his way here, must have come directly to the cove as soon as he'd left her. Bastard, bastard, but I know who you are, and even if the World Court hadn't ruled on whether selkies were human or not, you committed arson. The cops would find evidence if they knew who they were looking for.

"It's a long way to the top of that cliff. Don't accuse the wrong man." Urgency. "I didn't see anything anyway."

"So you weren't looking in the right place." Stung, Leta let go of him. Whose side are you *on*, anyway? she wanted to yell at him. That bastard tried to burn our *home*. . . . She surfaced in the entry pool, knee stabbing her, levered herself out of the water as he surfaced. His almost sullen distrust of what she'd seen hurt. She was sure.

"Leta?" Doc Vilcek, carryall over one shoulder, his face haggard. "Li just called in to say he'd lost you. Damn it, child!"

She didn't snap at him about *child*, because his face was twisting, crumpling in a way that scared her. "Who?" Her voice came out shaky, as if a part of her already knew. "Who's dead?"

"Maybe no one. They picked up the pilot. He's got some burns but not bad." Doc wasn't looking at her. "He could be down there safe, Sean's out with a team looking for him right now."

Him. Leta sat down on the mesh of the pool-rim, dizzy with more than shunt reaction. Tri? She couldn't say his name out loud, read the

confirmation in Doc's eyes as if she had. "He wasn't due back until . . . tomorrow," she whispered.

"I've got to get over to the beach. I've got the pilot and a couple more burn cases to deal with. No other deaths, thank God." His voice faltered as he realized what he had just said. "Tri could be all right." He put his arms around her, stubble against her cheek. "He probably is. He's probably fine."

Doc didn't think he was. Neither did she. She'd watched him fall out of the sky, like a piece of tossed-away trash. He'd never find his place in the sea, never feel like he belonged. Dane had taken that away from him forever.

"I know who did it!" She tore herself free of Doc's embrace, lurched to her feet. "I know who torched the buildings. I saw him on his way up the cliff. It *had* to be him."

"Leta, wait. . . ." Arlo's voice in her ear. She ignored it.

"He hates us. He wants us dead, because we don't fit, because we're not human, and we're *not*, but we're not selkies either, and we *need* to be, Doc. We need to be selkies first or we'll let ourselves die, let ourselves get pushed aside by the grubs, penned like fish. His name is Dane." She nearly shouted it, flung his name from her like the uncaring sky had flung Tri's copter aside. "He tried to rape me the other night." And she had been wrong about him letting her go. "He hangs out in town. I *saw* him. Dane!"

"*No!*" One piercing, pierced cry in her ear, and Arlo was gone.

Leta stared at the swirl of water in the pool. "Arlo?" A scatter of bubbles rose and the water calmed.

"Doc? Leta!" Sean burst through the water in the exact spot where Arlo had disappeared. "We found him. Miri did, anyway. Tri. He's alive." He grinned at her, lunged half out of the water, shaking clenched fists above his head. "I guess the crash knocked him out, but he's okay."

"I'm coming." Leta gasped as Doc's hand closed on her arm, yanked her to a halt.

"Are you sure you saw someone inside the protected area?" His voice had gone hard and cold. "You could recognize this guy?"

Doc wasn't a selkie, any more than Dane was. He was a grub. Leta looked into his aging face full of grief, and anger, and vengeance. "Oh yeah, I'll recognize him again." Bitterness clogged her throat. "I'll recognize him, no problem."

Tri's face had taken the worst burns, when he'd come to the surface after the crash. He had been looking for the pilot, had the presence of mind not to breathe as the spilled fuel flashed into fire around him. His shoulders had been burned also. And the lip of his gill tunnel, but not badly enough to impair its function and drown him as he lost consciousness.

Leta leaned against the clinic doorframe, frightened by the white glare of the bandages on Tri's face and arms. The lip of his gill tunnel had

swollen to an ugly slash across his chest that leaked tears of colorless fluid.

"Leta?" His head turned on the pillow, eyes unfamiliar in that blank whiteness of a non-face.

"How are you?" Leta took a hesitant step into the room.

"Probably not as bad as I look." He touched the thick gauze on his face.

His voice sounded strangely emotionless without facial cues. Angry? Sad? "I wanted to say . . . I'm always pushing." Leta swallowed. "I know I give you trouble, and . . . and I don't know if I can stop. But I think maybe . . . I understand." She looked away from his faceless eyes. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Do you understand?" The words came out low and flat. "Are you sure, Leta? Do you know what we were negotiating in Lucerne, or were you too busy pushing at boundaries? We were negotiating fishing quotas. Us selkies, Tanaka, and the independents who still manage to get their nets into the world oceans. We lost, Leta. Us and the independents." He turned his face away from hers. "I thought I'd played the right cards, made the right political connections to take Tanaka on and snatch a chunk of fishing rights for us. I was wrong. So now Tanaka gets to own an even larger share of us. We'll have to contract for any fishing we do through them." His voice dripped bitterness. "You might be right that our mother would be disappointed in me. If she and that Tanaka exec hadn't taken on the whole corporation, Tanaka might have us on their inventory, right next to the alvins. She was quite the rebel, Leta. Just like you. But she didn't have to make it *work*." He turned toward her again, his eyes windows into darkness. "I make it *work*, Leta. And everything has a price."

His bitterness, his *hurt*, scalded her. "You've . . . done a good job." Truth, there, let him hear it. "And . . ." She forced herself not to look away. ". . . I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Leta." He sighed, turned his face away, as if he wanted to sleep.

Leta left, glad that Doc wasn't in the clinic, wanting only silence and privacy. Defeat. That's what she'd seen in those familiar/unfamiliar eyes.

Defeat.

And that's not fair, a part of her cried. Because a part of her had believed in his strength, even as she fought with him. A part of her had depended on it.

He had made Briard . . . secure. And that very security had let her challenge him and it.

Suddenly, piercingly, ashamed, Leta slipped through the corridors, and down to the entry bay to go hide in the sea. For an instant, as she swam out into twilight depths, she thought she caught a glimpse of a pale shape following her. An alvin shape. But when she turned to look, it was only a trick of light and pale dead corals.

Doc took her in to ID Dane, in the gray drizzle of a rainy morning.

"They don't have much on him," he told her on the way. "They might have to let him go, but if you ID him, they'll hold him. They don't like him much, either. I guess he's kind of a local trouble-maker."

Dane wouldn't admit that he'd been in the cove, denied vehemently that he'd set the fire, Doc told her. And he told her that Dane made it very clear to anyone and everyone that he didn't think selkies ought to exist.

That last jarred Leta a little. He hadn't been like that, in the market. Not even when she'd hit him. Frowning, Leta stuck close to Doc as they walked the Whale Cove streets. Doc didn't mind town. Stares that lanced her seemed to slide past him, bounce off. Maybe it was his human skin. Human skin seemed to be tougher than selkie hide. More reflective.

A handful of protestors had gathered in front of the courthouse. Not many, because it was rainy today, and almost autumn cold. Some of the faces were familiar, because they hung out along the perimeter fence on a regular basis. She'd never really looked at them, Leta realized. She'd kept her distance, looked over them or through them, able to detour around their space. This time, she had to walk through them.

They looked like shit; dressed in castoffs, near rags, their faces mostly thin. Selkies were old news. The mass protests against genens had faded away as everybody waited for the World Court to make up its collective mind about selkies. Which maybe it would never do. Leta looked at the gaunt profile of an old man with a sagging, ruined face. Gray hairs stuck out in scraggly wisps on his chin, and his thin shoulders curved into a hollow-chested stoop. Pedestrians in the street looked past him, just like they looked past her. As if neither of them existed. Outcasts, she thought suddenly. They don't belong here any more than we do. It was as if hatred for the selkies had turned them into something other than human, too, as if they'd become the very thing they wanted to destroy. The old man turned to stare at her, and she shivered. There was no humanity in his face, just a blank wall of loathing. Leta had the sudden unsettling feeling that he didn't even see *her*, that he was seeing a ghost, a phantom that he had created, and only he could see.

"It's all right." Doc took her arm, his voice soothing. "They aren't violent."

She nodded, not having the words to tell him that she wasn't afraid of these people, that in some weird way . . . she pitied them. Because we are *other* than human, she thought. And they are *less*. Movement caught her eye, and Leta turned to look. A woman stood in the doorway of a cafe across the street. It was her body language that caught Leta's attention; a suddenly controlled start, as if she wanted to bolt back into the cafe.

Dr. Eleanor Sharf. She didn't want to talk to Dr. Sharf, hear any mention of Arlo at all, thank you. As she started to turn away, her eyes met Dr. Sharf's. Her face was the face of the old man; full of numb, untouchable, almost impersonal hatred. Leta recoiled as the doctor turned on her heel and vanished back into the cafe.

"Leta?" Doc shook her arm gently.

"Coming." Leta stumbled after him, her brain spinning.

She hadn't been wrong. Eleanor Sharf hated selkies. And suddenly, that blindly hating face superimposed itself on the face of the blonde woman behind Dane, firelight glittering in her eyes. Her hair had looked blonde in the firelight, and on the cliff, far enough away that the gray didn't show.

It had been Eleanor Sharf. Leta was suddenly as sure of it as of anything in her life. Eleanor Sharf was the woman who had cried "grab her" with death in her voice, that night on the beach. She had climbed the cliff behind Dane. Leta tripped over the steps inside the main door, barely felt Doc catch her. Why? Inside, the fluorescent lights made her head ache.

The cops didn't like selkies much either, but they were officially and briskly polite. An officer, a petite red-haired woman with an aging face, took Leta into a small room. It was dark, lighted only by a window that opened into a larger, brightly lit room.

"This is one-way glass," the officer told her in a bored monotone. "They can't see in here. Tell me if you recognize any of them. This is all being recorded, you understand." The woman cleared her throat, voice taking on a more formal, almost stilted rhythm. "Please verify that you understand the procedure by stating your name."

"I'm Leta Doyle, and I understand."

Men were walking into the room, five of them. They were all about the same height, all dark-haired. Dane was the third. He looked at the window; one quick sharp glance that seemed to focus on her face, as if the glass was transparent after all.

He didn't hate selkies, for all he might say so now. He had such an expectant air, as if he *wanted* her to ID him.

To cover up for Eleanor Sharf? Leta's gill tunnel quivered, and she watched his face carefully, searching for clues in those dark eyes. Why, Dane? Why would you do this, and for who? Because you're her lover?

Cold anger tightened her skin to gooseflesh, flushed the lip of her gill tunnel dark red. She caught the officer staring at it with mild disgust, looked away. Sorry, Dane. You don't get to take the blame for someone else. No matter what the reason.

Tri could have died.

"Stop," the bored officer said over a mic. "Face the window please." She looked sideways at Leta. "Do you recognize any of these men?"

Leta looked at her, smiled. "No. None of them are the man that I saw on the cliff above Briard Station."

"You don't recognize anyone here, is that correct, Ms. Doyle?" The cop was frowning. "You have never seen any of them before?"

"That's correct."

"Well, thank you for your time. End session." The officer swept Leta with one hard, disgusted glance, turned away to open the door. "We'll keep looking."

"I think the woman's hair might have had a lot of gray in it. I don't

think she was young." Leta put a pained, considering look onto her face. "I saw someone who looks like her in town the other day, but I don't know her name." I can play dumb fish, lady. Just you watch. Leta smiled apologetically. "I think she works for Tanaka. At least she showed up in a Tanaka van. Somebody told me she's some kind of researcher, that she lost a big grant because of us, that she really hates selkies."

"Is that so?" Still pissed, the cop was at least listening. "Do you know this woman's name?"

"Oh, yes, I *did* hear her name." She tried for an ingenuous smile. "I think it was something like Sharp. I don't remember." Maintain that guileless stare. "I think I'd know her in a lineup like this." You better believe it.

"Yeah." The cop glanced out at the now-empty room. "Well, we'll check it out, see what we come up with."

You don't want to, do you? You're pissed at me, now. Leta gave the cop a flustered, innocent look. But we've got a couple of media contacts, and they can maybe make things hot enough for you so that you need to go after *somebody*. And then you'll ask me to look again. And this time, I'll spot Eleanor Sharf. "The man you arrested? Dane? Could I talk to him for a minute? Just to say I'm sorry for causing him trouble?"

The cop hesitated. "I'll see."

She didn't much want to give Leta anything, but maybe she thought it would be rather nice for Leta to apologize to a grub. Anyway, she did go off and check with someone. Who apparently gave permission. Another cop—a short man with zits on his face—finally showed up to lead her down a grimy corridor. He unlocked a door and let her into a tiny room. "Ten minutes," he said, and slammed the door closed.

Dane looked up from a cheap fake-wood table, blinked at her. "That was you, huh?" He grinned, but he looked tired. Shadows stained the skin below his eyes, and the bones of his face jutted against his skin, as if he'd lost weight. "I couldn't tell who it was out in the water."

"It was me." She pulled out the single plastic chair opposite him. "I didn't make the ID."

"What?" His cheeks darkened slowly. "So you were too far away, huh? So what?" He shoved hair back from his face, leaned his elbows on the table. "Hell, I probably wouldn't get more than a year, if I behaved myself. Maybe I ought to confess and do a deal with the DA." He tossed his head, eyes evading hers. "Save us all a lot of trouble."

"Sorry, Dane." She met those cold agate eyes. "I was close enough, and it wasn't you I saw. I described her to the cops. Right down to almost getting the name right." She looked down at her clasped hands, watched him from the corners of her eyes. "She did it, not you."

"Fuck." He sucked in a quick breath, because he'd just given it away and he knew it. "Look, you don't understand. God, I hope this place isn't bugged." He looked around the room wildly, fists clenched and still on the tabletop in front of him. "Don't do this, okay? You're . . . going to hurt somebody bad. Somebody who doesn't deserve the hurt."

"Her?"

"No."

Leta shook her head. "Tell me why," she said softly.

"I've known Eleanor for . . . nearly seventeen years." Dane let his breath out slowly, shoulders slumping. "When her funding got cut, I guess she had to blame someone. And it was you selkies she focused on. I think she's . . . kind of borderline. She got involved with some of the local selkie-haters—like those two bozos on the beach. All talk, I figured, but I sort of kept an eye on her." He drew a slow breath. "I didn't figure that she'd do something . . . like that." He laughed a single bitter note. "I guess she didn't trust me after all, because she didn't tell me. She would have torched the rest of the place if I hadn't gotten there. She was . . . pretty upset."

"She almost killed my brother." Leta clasped her hands over her quivering gill tunnel. "Why the fuck do you want to protect her? Because she's your lover, right? You think I care?"

"She's not my lover." His voice was low, intense. "Arlo loves her. Don't you get it?" He turned his face away. "She means everything to him. She gave him life. He didn't have one, would never have had one except for her. You do this to him . . ." He swallowed his Adam's apple bobbing in his lean throat. "Do this to him and you'll kill him."

Love in that hard, tortured profile? "You're his brother, aren't you?" She opened her hands, spread them on the tabletop until the webbing stretched tight between her fingers. "He told me about you. That after your father died, you and he . . . survived."

"I'm not his brother." Dane let his head droop. "We've always called it that—brothers. And I think maybe he's sort of forgotten we aren't. If he'd really been my brother, the state would have let me be his guardian. I was working. I could've supported us both."

Love in that handful of words. And incredible pain.

"I used to work for Brent—Arlo's dad. I don't think his death was an accident, never mind the storm." Dane stared at the wall, eyes tracking visions she couldn't see. "Tanaka was eliminating stubborn competition. And Brent was stubborn. Maybe that was why they took Arlo into the program. Kind of like an apology." He laughed a single bitter note. "You know, in a way, I think you've hurt Eleanor as much as Tanaka ever hurt Brent. And without even trying." He grinned at her, his eyes bleak. "You see, Tanaka cut her program because you selkies could do it all better than Arlo, and you can *breed* new selkies. Tanaka doesn't have to pay production-line costs."

"She hates us."

"If she goes to prison . . . it'll break Arlo." This time, Dane turned his face far enough away that she couldn't read his expression. "I'm asking you." Low voice, so rough with pain that she could barely make out the words. "Nobody died. You've got to have insurance to pay for the damage, right? Don't do it."

"Don't do what?" Leta asked softly. "Don't turn Eleanor Sharf over to

the cops? You want us to sit and wait for her to try again, maybe kill a few of us next time? We're just fish, right? No big loss."

"No." Whispered word. "You're not just fish." He looked at her finally, a muscle twitching at the corner of his mouth. "Please?"

What had that word cost this man? "So you want her to go free, huh?" She groped for anger, but it had evaporated, left a dull defeat in its wake. "She gets to walk away, to play games with Arlo, and too damn bad about us? There will be a next time and you know it." Her voice quivered. "You can't do it, can't protect him from everything."

"I didn't protect him from anything." Dane stared at the wall, his profile as hard as stone. "I . . . made him into what he is. I sold him to Tanaka because . . . he'd be safe. And I didn't know what the hell else to do."

Guilt in those words, enough to silence her. And the same terrible echo of defeat that she'd heard in Tri's voice. "What's wrong with him?" Her voice trembled.

"One of those genen viruses. Some mutated stuff that probably escaped from a third-rate lab." His lips tightened. "There are still a lot of those kicking around. They can . . . really mess you up."

An answer and no answer at all. Leta stood, because there was nothing left to say and they both knew it.

He didn't say a word as she left. He and Tri. They had betrayed what they loved best. To keep it safe. Leta closed the door very softly and slumped against the corridor wall. Love and responsibility. Maybe there was no way to do it right. Inside, some part of her wailed, because she hadn't wanted to know this.

"Excuse me, miss." A uniformed officer paused on his way to somewhere. "Can I help you?"

Do I look like I need help? Leta almost asked him. Do I look that desperate?

And maybe she was. That desperate.

"I came with a friend. To do an ID." She looked into a round, freckled face, gray eyes that didn't shy away from her too-large irises. "I don't know where to look for him."

"The waiting room is right this way." He put his hand on her elbow to usher her down the corridor.

His fingers slid down her arm, slowly, sensuously. She looked up startled, met gray eyes full of urgency and . . . lust. His erection bulged against his uniform pants and Leta looked quickly away, shrugging off his hand. Her throat closed on sudden queasiness, and she rubbed her arm, wanting to scrub her skin where he'd touched her. It felt so . . . wrong. Shameful. We are not human, Leta thought, and wanted to cry. Arlo had touched her with his inhuman hands. She hadn't felt any sense of wrong then. The cop opened the door for her, his hungry eyes still caressing her. She ducked away from him, through the door and into a shabby waiting room.

Doc was there, bless him, sitting impatiently on the edge of his chair.

Dr. Eleanor Sharf sat beside him, her knees touching his, as if they were new lovers.

"Leta." Dr. Sharf hurried across the room. "Have you seen Arlo?"

Leta had been stringing the words together, honing a razor's edge onto what she wanted to say to this woman. Arlo's name, spoken so baldly, jolted everything into disarray. "No." She blinked. "Not for a while." Not for too long. "Why?" Her heart shuddered. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Dr. Sharf's eyes searched here, there, wouldn't meet hers. "He took off on one of his midnight swims—he's such a moody boy." Her eyes accused Leta. "Anyway, he didn't come back last night. I don't know where he is." That accusation crept into her tone, dissonant with real worry. "I thought maybe *you* knew."

"Me? Why me?" Leta glared at Dr. Sharf, wanting to recoil, hating this woman, tethered to her by a name, a memory, a *feeling*.

Love. For Arlo.

"Maybe he got tired of you owning him and took off."

Eleanor Sharf went briefly pale, but there was no anger on her face, just worry and a look of . . . loss. "He wouldn't just run away," she said softly.

Leta shivered and looked away from eyes like windows into emptiness. Her hatred had congealed into a cold, bitter sadness. Eleanor Sharf loved Arlo, was maybe so focused on him, on her failed project, that no one and nothing else had any reality. Or maybe Arlo had *become* that project, the living symbol, the focus of career, and success, and personal identity, all mixed and twisted into love. Yeah, Dane was right, that she was maybe crazy. And maybe saw Leta as a threat. With a sudden chill, Leta wondered how much her friendship with Arlo had precipitated Dr. Sharf's arson, and Tri's injuries.

"Where would he go?" Breathly words, full of fear. Leta hated herself for showing her fear to this woman, caught the flicker of acknowledgment and . . . hatred as Dr. Sharf heard that fear, too.

"What if he decided not to come back?" Could he *know*? About Sharf, about her burning the storage modules? *Arlo loves her*, Dane had said, and maybe Dane thought that was all that mattered to Arlo. But Leta had heard the pain in Arlo's voice when she had accused Dane in the Station entry pool. And now, Dane was in jail. Because of Eleanor Sharf. And because of *her*. "Where would he go?"

"Nowhere." Impatience in the doctor's voice, an echo of jealousy. "He can't leave. He's on a maintenance program and you don't mess with that."

Maintenance. Leta shivered, dread gathering in her belly. She knew where he was.

"I need a copter standing by." She met Eleanor Sharf's hating, needy stare. "I'll call for it if something's wrong." What could be wrong? Surely he was just sulking, putting off coming home for as long as he could. Leta turned her back, stripping off her shift, kicking off her uncomfortable shoes. The sea was unforgiving.

"Hey!" Doc grabbed her bundled clothes as she tossed them at him. "What the hell are you up to, lady?"

"Arlo's my friend, and I think he's under somewhere, in trouble." Clad only in her trunks, she touched his shoulder. "Tell the pilot how to pick up my implant broadcast. So you can find me if he's hurt. Please, Doc?"

"Tell me what all this is about later, please." He tucked her clothes under his arm, gave Dr. Sharf a hostile glance. "Be careful."

Doc was a grub. Doc *cared* about her. Leta hugged him suddenly and hard, flung herself out of the sterile little waiting room, past the pair of cops who were staring with curiosity and disgust at the bulge of her gill. Outside, she turned left, limping on her knee, clumsy on land, alien. Three blocks to the water. People looked at her, looked quickly away from her naked chest. Was it breasts or gill that repelled them, she wondered? Teeth clenched against the pain, she limped out to the end of the splintered boards at the end of the dock. Dove. Water exploded past her face, bubbles streaming, welcome coolness erecting her gill.

Oh yes, she guessed where he'd go, hurting man, alvin, not one without the other, grieving for brother, or mother, or maybe both. The cave.

And maybe he was fine, was hiding out and sulking, angry at Dane, angry at her. Maybe he'd tell her to go to hell, leave him alone.

Dr. Sharf was afraid for him. Maintenance. . . .

When you were ready, the sea was willing to take you. Leta's knee stabbed her with every stroke; pain signaling stress, or maybe even damage, but it was too late to worry about that now. The cave wasn't too far—just around the headland, between the town and Briard, poised between human and selkie space. He didn't belong to either one, didn't really belong anywhere. She spotted the dark shadow of the entrance beneath a rocky outcrop, closed her eyes briefly as she dove into shadow. The tunnel mouth was there, yawning and dark. She angled in, down, low ceiling scraping her shoulderblades, shredding skin.

Light above. *Bright* light.

Oh shit. The tunnel ended in piled rock. The ceiling had come down like Arlo had predicted. Maybe the explosion as the fuel-tanks blew had done it. Bitter justice if Eleanor Sharf's arson had killed the one person she had loved.

Leta didn't want that kind of justice.

She clawed at a rock, pulled it free. It tumbled past in slow motion, trailing veils of disturbed silt. Was he here somewhere? Crushed beneath that pile of rock, drowned and dead? Like the mermaid's comb died, if you smashed that fragile, perfect shell? Or was he long gone, somewhere else? Leta followed the light, squeezed through an opening in the fallen rock, gill scraping across stone, claustrophobia squeezing her like the rock squeezed her. Then she was through, one hip-bone banging on a slab of stone, losing more skin to her passage.

The cave was piled with dirt, fallen bushes, and sunlight, open to the sky.

And Arlo was there. His alvin body showed beneath piled rock, manipulator arms bent and broken. The water was clear, waist-deep, slapping gently against the fallen stone as she panted air into her lungs. "Arlo? Arlo, are you there?" Silence in her ears, a roaring lack of noise that filled her with fear. No movement from the twisted alvin-arms. She heaved at the rocks, tearing finger-webs, tumbling chunks of stone and soggy bushes from the alvin. Horror squeezed her as she saw the dents, the deep scrapes. It *hurt* him when she slapped his hull. Not that many rocks . . . the copter should be here, maybe, if Dr. Sharf had one to send, if Arlo really mattered to her.

One rock shifted, starting others tumbling in a small slide. Leta flung herself aside, splashing deeper, managed not to get hit. As the miniature slide ended she realized that the top of the submerged alvin was clear, that she could maybe get it open, if she could figure out how.

What was she going to find inside?

Leave it, she thought, wait for help. But what if it was leaking? What if this final rock-slide had bent a seam, let in the sea. The sea didn't give you a second chance. Leta slid her bleeding hands across the slick, not-quite-hard hull. Blood wasn't red underwater. It was kind of a soft gray-green and it drifted like smoke on the water. There. . . . She felt the seam before her eyes registered it. Her fingers followed it, urgency twisting her guts into a knot. She found an indentation, touched a narrow protrusion, a bar? Some kind of latch? She slid her numb fingers beneath it, pried hard.

The hull cracked, air bursting out in giant bubbles. And Arlo was a grub, never mind that he swam with her, and if the alvin filled up with water, he'd drown. Idiot, *idiot!* Full of panic and rage at her own stupidity, Leta groped in the silty water, touched thin flesh on fragile bones, snagging wires, tubes, yanking things loose because she didn't have *time*, a part of her squeezing down tight on what she felt, what all those wires had to mean. . . . He came free, too light, small as a child in her arms. The water was so shallow, she could stand up easily. Light dazzled her, and she staggered, battered by her struggle with the rocks, dizzy as her gill struggled with the confusion of chest-deep water. He wasn't breathing, didn't seem to be, anyway. Pale skin, face angular and thin, fine, almost fragile; it registered like a photograph in her mind. Bluish eyelids, slack, unresponsive lips as she hooked a finger through his mouth, under his tongue. Clear. Cradling him on the water's surface, she tilted his head back, lips sealing over his. She breathed, watched his chest rise.

Come on, *live*, damn it.

Breathe.

Live, you bastard, don't you dare die.

Breathe.

Don't die, because you *matter*, because I never had a real friend before, not somebody who understood, and I think you're it. . . .

Breathe.

He coughed. Weakly. Choked, and tried to turn his face away from hers.

Alive. She held him gently, chest-deep in water, floating him on that thin boundary between sea and sky. "I love you," she whispered, and the truth of those words terrified her. *I love you*. Infinite power, infinite vulnerability, poised here on the skin between two worlds.

"I love you," she whispered. "Please don't die."

"I... won't." His eyelids fluttered, words a breath like the beat of a butterfly's wings.

Leta bent her head as the sound of a copter thundered in the distance. "You better not," she said, and began to cry, her tears dripping into the sea, salt water into salt water.

The hospital smelled frightening, not like Doc's clinic at all. He had clucked at her in Briard, picked at her silence, had finally given up and offered her a ride here. She had accepted, a little sad, because he *cared* so much, wincing at his grief for her. Maybe that was the common denominator, Leta decided as she padded down interterminal corridors that reeked of disinfectant. Maybe grief was the ultimate connection between selkie and human. Grief required no past.

Arlo was in a room by himself, ward of Tanaka still, taken care of, because Tanaka always took care of its own. To its own profit and in its own way, of course, but Tanaka was *ethical*. Leta peeked around the door frame, shy suddenly, as if he was a stranger, frightened by those white sheets, the way Tri's bandages frightened her. Tri would heal. Not Arlo. . . .

He looked so fragile on the white pillow, shrouded by the sheet, his body shrunken, too small. An accidental virus—a small silent catastrophe during his mother's pregnancy, a by-product of the genen frenzy that had spawned the selkies. So maybe we didn't just lose you your funding, Leta thought bitterly. Maybe our creation lost you a life, too. Maybe that blame will always be there, too big and too invisible to ever deal with.

Leta shifted her weight on her aching feet that didn't work very well on land. He was still asleep. Time to go home. Time to go back to Briard and play games with the fish, train dolphins for Tanaka, safe inside their Court-established walls.

"Leta?"

More breath than word, his voice stopped her cold.

"Don't go."

Yeah, he was awake, eyes bright in his pale face, his undersized body hidden, his face so *human*. His eyes were hazel, flecked with gold, shadowed and enormous in his fine-boned face.

"Why?" he whispered, and the pain in those eyes dazzled her like too-bright sunlight.

Why did you save me? Why did you see me, look at me, expose me? So many echoes to that single word. She had no words to answer any of

them. Silent, she crossed the vast gulf of space that yawned between door and bed.

"I love you," she whispered, and kissed him on the lips.

He tried to turn his head away, but she didn't let him. Stiff at first, his lips softened slowly.

"How can you love me?" It came out hoarse, raw with pain, those echoes still there.

"I just do." She stroked his cheek, hurting because he didn't know yet, and he'd have to know soon. That they had arrested Eleanor Sharf. She was out on bail, charged with arson, her career probably in ruins. If Tri had died, she would still have been charged with arson. Because it might not be a murder at all to kill a selkie.

"Tri said that everything has a price," she whispered. "Even life."

"And love?" He hunched beneath the sheet, hidden, full of memory and pain. "You are so . . . beautiful in the sea. So free. You belong."

And you've never been free, she thought, you never really will be. Who got the blame for that? The selkies? Who got the blame for the destroyed buildings at Briard, Tri's burns, and Arlo's injury? Eleanor Sharf? Or was it Leta's fault, because she had threatened the doctor, pushed her over a cliff-edge of violence? You could spend your life dealing with blame. She touched Arlo's sheeted body, felt him flinch, and didn't take her hand away.

"Eleanor was here." His hand, child-small, crept like a shy crab from beneath the sheet, touched her fingers. He smiled then, but there was pain in that smile. "She says a week before I can . . . get back into my . . . the prototype. It's not too badly damaged."

What would Tanaka do with him now? Leta closed her fingers tight around his.

"They let Dane go." He was watching her face, his expression hesitant. "Did you know that he's my brother? He took care of me, from as far back as I can remember."

"Yes." And maybe he wasn't Arlo's brother according to his DNA, but did that matter? Maybe we pay too damn much attention to DNA, Leta thought. She pulled Arlo's too-small, too-thin arm from beneath the sheet. "I heard they acquitted him. I'm glad, Arlo." And yeah, you love Dane, for all that he thinks Eleanor is your whole world. And I saved the person that matters, and I'll never tell you that. Clasping his hand, she touched the implanted ports in the hand, wrist, elbow. How much surgery had it taken to install the interface hardware? How much pain had he been willing to trade for strength, for the mobility he'd never had? He *was* the alvin, its nervous system an extension of his own, its eyes, ears, strength his own, a body he could be proud of. A body that could imprison him.

"We're human, you know." She raised his hand to her lips, kissed it gently. "Not *Homo sapiens*, but *human*. Both of us."

"I guess," he said, but his eyes doubted briefly.

Will you blame me for Eleanor? Leta reached for the sheet, and he

clutched at her, fingers digging into her flesh. "Please?" she whispered. Beneath her shift, the lip of her gill tunnel fluttered, pulsing against the thin fabric.

He looked at that hidden movement, raised his eyes to her face. Slowly he took her hand away from the sheet. "All right." He folded the too-white cloth neatly back.

Everything has its price. She looked at his shrunken, unformed body, examining his narrow ribcage, thin shoulders, noting the ports, the small scars left by buried hardware. Wisps of dark pubic hair straggled around his genitals, black against his pale skin. She touched him again, lightly, lingeringly. "I've got to go." She kissed him slowly, and this time, he didn't try to turn away. "You know, maybe not having a past isn't such a bad thing. We can concentrate on the future." She fumbled her belt-pouch open. "I found this."

The mermaid's comb was a small specimen, delicate and perfect.

He hesitated, frowning at it. Finally, hesitantly, he took it, his small fingers infinitely careful of the fragile spines. "Thank you." He looked up, met her eyes. "I guess we'll have to find a new place to look for these."

"We will." She touched one chocolate-colored spine, smiled. "We have the whole sea to explore, don't we?"

"Yeah." He smiled at her finally. "We do." ●

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ON BOOKS

by Peter Heck

A Song for Arbonne

By Guy Gavriel Kay

Roc, \$5.99

Kay's latest—just out in paper from Roc—might just as well be called alternate history as fantasy. The magical element (which some consider the *sine qua non* of fantasy) is almost entirely absent. As with his previous big fantasy novel, *Tigana*, this one takes place in an imaginary world similar in many ways to medieval Europe—in this case, thirteenth-century Provence. Of course, any reader with a little familiarity with that period of history will probably recognize much of the material Kay is drawing from, and enjoy spotting the parallels and borrowings. But *A Song for Arbonne* is more than just a reworking of history with a few simple “what ifs” turned the other way around.

In both *Tigana* and *Arbonne*, Kay's worlds are richly populated, full of interesting places and customs, packed with details that carry the ring of authenticity. They are convincing stages for the sort of grand heroism in the face of inexorable fate that is the real subject of any genuine epic. But they are also attractive esthetic objects in themselves: worlds that reflect reality as we know it, but in

brighter colors and tighter focus, and balanced somewhat more elegantly than the real-world models.

The world of *Arbonne* differs from ours in details of geography, although most readers will be able to give “real-world” names to the countries on the map at the front of the book. As in medieval Europe, the landscape is dotted with the ruins of a great vanished civilization analogous to Rome, but Christianity has not developed—instead, there is a pagan religion, worshipping two gods whose names derive from the planet's two moons: Rian, goddess of love and of music, and Corranos, a patriarchal war god. The dualistic nature of the religion is particularly strong in *Arbonne*, where the two gods have equal sway, and women hold a large share of power and influence in affairs of state.

The plot revolves around the career of Duke Bertran de Talair, renowned as a lover, troubadour, and warrior—combining in one person the defining values of *Arbonne*. We first meet him in a prologue, in which Aelis de Miraval, wife of the powerful Duke Urte, arranges a tryst with the young Bertran—an episode which will create powerful enmity between the two Dukes, ultimately threatening the survival of their land. The division between

Talair and Miraval weakens Arbonne, and attracts the attention of its northern rival, Gorhaut—a bleak, warlike nation, in which the civilizing influence of the goddess is almost entirely absent. The larger political drama of the novel is played out on the stage created by these rivalries.

The reader sees much of that drama through the stories of two characters: a young mercenary (or "coran") named Blaise, who takes service with Duke Bertran; and a young woman named Lisseut, a talented singer from the south of Arbonne. The two provide a nicely balanced pair of viewpoints for the reader. An expatriate northerner, Blaise sees Arbonne from a stranger's perspective—a warrior captain from a male-dominated society uncomfortably similar to our own, learning the customs of a land where women rule and where love is considered high art. For her part, Lisseut is a consummate insider, living the life of a troubadour in a society that values musical creation above almost all else.

Lisseut and Blaise cross paths in Tavernal—the largest city of Arbonne—during the Midsummer Carnival, at which love and music reign, and the warrior's arts are in eclipse. Here especially the musical theme—Lisseut's story, and its intersection with that of Bertran, in his role as troubadour—adds both emotion and distance to the epic plot. Kay manages to convey the impact of the music without falling into impressionistic fuzziness, and does justice to the craft of the musicians without boring the reader (as too many novelists writing about music have done) with endless rehearsal scenes.

ON BOOKS

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As in his previous novels, Kay deploys a large cast of characters, nicely balanced between the sexes. He has grown beyond the simplistic overlaying of mythic archetypes onto his characters that made his "Fionavar Tapestry" trilogy seem too schematic after his first book. Perhaps his major remaining shortcoming is a tendency to skip too quickly over the peasants and spear-carriers. In *A Song for Arbonne*, we see things almost entirely from the perspective of those on the top ranks of whatever segment of society they inhabit. To look at it another way, Kay's distillation of epic fantasy has very few Sam Gamgees. This is not altogether a liability; for one thing, it gives the novel a tight focus on the great events of the plot and those who shape them. There is also a more consistent tone, in keeping with the epic quality of the book as a whole. The characters Kay does follow are almost invariably interesting and well-drawn, in itself a significant asset.

Out of all these elements, Kay creates a remarkably complex story, covering the space of one year. The plot is a non-stop succession of seductions and kidnappings, chance encounters and sudden revelations, revenge and justice and fate. Blaise's mysterious past gradually unfolds, revealing him as a major player in the political drama, as the patriarchs of Gorhaut unfold their strategy to annex the rich lands of despised Arbonne.

Kay is particularly good at portraying combat, and so we see Blaise in a series of battles that increase in intensity over the

course of the book from an ambush to a formal duel to the concluding set-piece battle.

But there is also a quieter thread working beneath the violent surface, a grand strategy of women's powers, in which the influence of the goddess prevails. The priestesses of Rian do not have great magical powers with which to influence the course of battle. Rather, their power arises from deep insight into events, and an awareness of how to shape them in subtle ways. They have a strategy prepared for the final battle, a surgically precise stroke that turns the day. They have a long-hidden secret, a resolution for the deadly rivalry between the Dukes of Miraval and Talair. These forces came together at the climactic moment, resolving the fates of two kingdoms in a way that mere force of arms could not.

Here as elsewhere in the novel, Kay's sense of timing is wonderful. He has few equals when it comes to setting up a surprise reappearance of a character whose story we thought was finished three hundred pages ago, precisely at the point of maximum effect. He throws nothing away. Every detail of his fantasy world—weather and landscape, small animals and old folk sayings—contributes to the overall impact of the novel. One could make a very good case for Guy Kay as the finest current writer of epic fantasy in the manner of Tolkien.

Fantasy readers who feel that novels ought to be coherent, shapely structures as well as compelling stories should not miss *A Song for Arbonne*.

Mirror Dance

By Lois McMaster Bujold

Baen, \$21.00

Bujold continues her popular Vorkosigan saga with a double feature. This time, the plot revolves not only around her hero Miles Vorkosigan (a.k.a. mercenary Admiral Naismith) but also around his clone/evil twin Mark Pierre. Created by Vorkosigan's enemies (in *Brothers in Arms*) as a tool to assassinate Miles' father, Mark Pierre returns to impersonate Miles, this time in pursuance of an objective entirely his own. While the novel is the ninth in a series chronicling the adventures of Miles Vorkosigan, most readers will have no problem reading it as an independent book.

The story begins when Mark takes command of one of Miles's ships and heads off on a solo raid to rescue the current crop of fifty clones. Mark's target is the clone factory of which he himself is a product. Most clones are grown on special order for aging rich clients who wish to transplant their brains and memories to a healthy young body; a form of legal murder, in Mark's view, but the clone-makers of Jackson's Whole recognize no law other than wealth and power. They themselves have plenty of both.

Mark's wildcat rescue mission creates several difficulties for Miles. It's bad enough that one of his best ships (and its trusted captain, Bel Thorne) has been hijacked—just when he needs it for an important mission. Worse, Miles's last visit to Jackson's Whole made him several enemies, who are likely to be unhappy at his re-

turn and who won't stop to figure out which of the two Vorkosigans they've caught. That could cost him a brother (Miles insists that Mark is his twin, not his clone) as well as a ship. So there is nothing to do but ride to the rescue, hoping to save Mark's bacon as well as recapture the missing ship.

From there on, things go wrong in a major way. After a disastrous raid and rescue, Mark ends up on Barrayar, Miles's home planet. There he meets his "parents" and discovers that he is willy-nilly expected to take a role in the Barrayaran hierarchy suitable to his status as a noble of the Vor caste. But Mark grows impatient when Barrayaran Imperial Security fails to turn-up leads to the whereabouts of Miles, who is missing in action, and possibly in enemy hands. Finally coming to grips with his own responsibility for the disaster, Mark mounts another rescue mission to Jackson's Whole.

Of course, the bad guys are waiting there, and *both* Miles and Mark are captured by the enemy (although by different factions) and, after a life-and-death struggle against long odds, the good guys win and the bad guys lose. Bujold makes the struggle interesting and the outcome satisfying. She even makes you worry about her twin protagonists although you're pretty sure they're going to make it. Readers in search of a "good read" need look no farther. But *Mirror Dance* provides plenty of food for thought, for those who look for something more than action.

Not far below the surface of the plot is a set of variations on the theme of identity. Miles, stifled in

his role as the heir apparent to a powerful Barrayar aristocrat, has taken on the freer role of Admiral Naismith—in which he feels more himself than in his proper niche back home. Mark, created only as a twisted parody of Miles, is forced in Miles' absence to become a substitute Miles, with his own preordained if not yet familiar niche in the Vor game. But as the plot progresses, both those adaptations break down; Miles must relearn who he is from the ground up, while Mark finds himself in a situation where his very survival depends on abandoning his newfound identity—indeed, his very sanity.

At the same time, the group of clones Mark set out to rescue are effectively non-persons—their creators viewed them as bodies made to order for rich customers, and gave them nothing beyond what they needed to stay healthy and attractive until their owners were ready to move in. The clones have been encouraged to believe that they are destined for adoption by someone incredibly rich, who will see that their every wish is fulfilled—an illusion some of them refuse to abandon even when Mark shows up to rescue them. Another group of clones—all offshoots of the same genetic original—have gained a sort of independence by running a medical clinic, offering duplicate doctors with the same natural ability applied to a variety of specialties.

Bujold presents the highly structured aristocratic society of Barrayar as one source of meaningful identity; each person has a role, and what one is depends on the

role. Mark, in the end, seems to have accepted Barrayar as the framework in which he can be someone real. For his part, Miles is happiest in the role he has created for himself, playing by his own rules. Barrayar is by no means Utopia—Bujold gives us a few glimpses of mindless low-caste conformity, and more than a few of aristocratic incompetence—but it is flexible enough to find niches for, and to give free rein to the abilities of, two uncompromisingly square pegs from the Vorkosigan bloodlines.

In one sense, Miles Vorkosigan is Bujold's equivalent of a far-future James Bond—without the physical glamour, to be sure, but otherwise every bit as sexy, resourceful, and driven as his twentieth-century predecessor. As in the Bond books, there is large-scale political intrigue, a series of thoroughly nasty villains, a touch of snob appeal, and plenty of action and intrigue. Add to that the prime science-fictional virtues of solid world-building and open-minded willingness to explore questions to which the author doesn't necessarily possess the answers, and Bujold's popularity is easy to understand. *Mirror Dance* is not necessarily her best book—*Falling Free* may still hold that honor—but it's an excellent novel, and a good place for readers just discovering Bujold to begin.

Dark Mirror

By Diane Duane
Pocket, \$22.00

Dissing Star Trek is a fairly popular indoor sport; anybody with a moderately analytical bent can

point out plenty of absurdities in the premises of the show and its often slapdash use of materials appropriated from "real SF." This low opinion is often transferred to the Star Trek novels, as well—despite the fact that a good number of writers with excellent SF credentials have taken a fling at writing Star Trek novels, among them James Blish, Vonda McIntyre, John M. Ford, Barbara Hambly, and even Joe Haldeman. One of the most popular of these authors is Diane Duane.

Duane's sixth Star Trek novel, *Dark Mirror*, combines classic material from the original show with the cast of "Star Trek: The Next Generation." The story is a follow-up to the popular Trek episode "Mirror, Mirror," in which the *Enterprise* found itself confronted with its duplicate from an alternate universe in which all the members of its crew are evil caricatures of themselves. Duane takes the new *Enterprise* and the "Next Generation" crew into a new encounter with the *Enterprise* from the alternate universe—featuring evil counterparts of its crew.

Having two versions of the same character to play with is certainly an actor's dream, and Duane shows that a writer can have plenty of fun with it, as well. The reality from which the evil version of the *Enterprise* comes could have been designed by Machiavelli; brutal political infighting is the norm, with bribery, assassination and torture the regular tools for advancing one's career. Every officer on the dark *Enterprise* has a personal corps of bodyguards, loyal to the one who pays them—as long as

someone else doesn't pay them more. It is a society in which the way to success is completely amoral opportunism.

The encounter begins when an intruder is discovered meddling with the good *Enterprise's* computers, and the ship's sensors discover a heavily armed gunmetal-gray ship bearing the name *Enterprise* watching them from a short distance away. The saboteur, who turns out to be a double for a minor crew member, is captured and questioned, but reveals little before dying—killed by a virus implanted in him by his officers on the dark *Enterprise*. The new *Enterprise* has at least the advantage of knowing about the earlier confrontation, and its outcome. So, of course, does the crew of their evil counterpart, which has engineered the shift between realities in order to launch an invasion of our universe, in search of *lebensraum*.

Capt. Picard, the telepathic Counselor Deanna Troi, and the engineer, Geordi La Forge, transport over to the alternate ship on a mission to disable it and allow the original *Enterprise* to return to our universe. The captured saboteur's reactions to Troi and Picard have given them some notion of what their evil counterparts are like, so they have the ability (with stolen uniforms) to play their alter-egos' roles for a short while. But the impersonation turns out to be even more dangerous than it first appears to be.

Being discovered as imposters is only one of their worries. Playing the role of a character so opposite to oneself exacts a high payment both physically and mentally, es-

pecially when the situation calls for action that goes against deeply instilled beliefs and morals. Picard finds the bridge a snake-pit of insubordination, with his second-in-command Riker scheming to displace him, while the conduct of several other crew members borders on insolence. When Picard makes the mistake of wandering the corridors of this new ship without his bodyguard, one of the least likely members of the crew ambushes him with murderous intent. A few chapters later, he learns that his evil counterpart is carrying on an affair with one of the women on the crew—after having sent her husband on a suicide mission.

The altruistic Deanna Troi is especially worried, since she has learned that her counterpart is a power-hungry sadist looking for ways to destroy the captain of the dark *Enterprise*. The evil Troi is the most feared person on her ship, the equivalent of a Soviet “political officer,” who can overrule the captain on issues within her authority—even depose him on grounds of security. Deanna Troi’s healing discipline involves using her powers only for the benefit of others, and she is profoundly disturbed to learn of her evil opposite’s propensity for mental and physical torture.

These internal conflicts, and to a lesser degree those of Geordi La Forge, are far more the center of the novel than the inevitable physical confrontations of Picard and Troi with their evil opposites. This of course plays to the strength of the written word as opposed to the dramatic media: the printed page may lack the immediacy of a mov-

ing, brightly colored image, but it is the ideal medium for introspection. Everything that Troi and Picard see around them on the dark *Enterprise* calls up some awareness of how profoundly *wrong* this alien reality is.

At one point Picard picks up a copy of Shakespeare from the evil reality, and finds that it falls open at Portia’s famous speech, “The quality of mercy is not strained,” in *The Merchant of Venice*. But instead of mercy and justice, the plot ends in bloody vengeance and crude jests. Other books have subtle changes, too—although Xenophon, another of Picard’s favorites, is curiously unaltered, and others seem never to have been written at all. A landscape painting Picard has been working on in his own cabin shows up in the other Picard’s cabin. It is almost identical, right down to individual brush strokes—but curiously darker and much more sinister. Most telling of all are differences in the racial makeup of the crews—many of the nonhuman officers (including Data, the android) that populate the *Enterprise* are missing from her dark counterpart, exterminated by the ruthless human race in its expansion to the stars.

The novel’s derivation from a TV series with a continuing cast has its liabilities as well as the obvious benefit of a built-in audience. Because of its ongoing nature, a Trek author is stuck with a cast of specific characters who have to be alive and unchanged in any essential at the end of the book. Duane generally resists the temptation to play only to the regular fans of the show, relying on familiar tag lines

and in-jokes. Of course, *Dark Mirror*'s basic premise gives her an easy way to add needed variety to the standard interactions of the regular cast. She also takes advantage of her prerogative of bringing in a "guest star," in this case a Starfleet researcher named Hwiii (pronounced Wheel!), an exuberant and entertaining dolphinlike alien who's studying subspace hyperstring structure.

All things considered, *Dark Mirror* is an intelligent and well crafted piece of work. Its flaws, such as they are, are the flaws of the original TV show—among them, a healthy dose of woo-woo in the "science," and a cast of characters not every reader will find all that interesting or sympathetic. In those areas where she has some freedom to invent something of her own, Duane shows a bright sense of humor, a perceptive creation of detail, and the ability to dramatize her characters' reactions. If it's been a few years since you took a look at a Trek novel, this would be an excellent place to find out what a good writer can do with the material. Be warned—you may find yourself looking for more of the same.

Sam Gunn, Unlimited

By Ben Bova
Bantam, \$5.99

Ben Bova is probably best known to SF readers for his big, serious hard-science books, like *Mars*. It's easy to forget that he has a nice touch with a lighter story, as well. His latest, *Sam Gunn*, is a fix-up built around several humorous stories—most of which appeared in *F&SF*—telling the story

of an engaging rogue whose interest in enriching himself is surpassed only by his interest in chasing women. The various stories are all told from the point of view of Gunn's former shipmates after his death, and Bova connects them with a frame story featuring a young woman, a Lunar news reporter named Jade, who is researching Sam Gunn's life for a feature.

The tone of the collection is light adventure with a touch of comedy, but Bova has a serious agenda as well. The stories are all set in the middle-range future, from just after the establishment of permanent space stations to the placement of scientific outposts on the far fringes of the solar system. As one might expect, Bova postulates a future in which private enterprise gradually takes over the exploration of the solar system in the face of increasingly ineffective government support for space programs. The resourceful Sam Gunn, who sees space primarily as another resource to be exploited, is a natural exponent of Bova's laissez-faire philosophy.

With this much emphasis on space as the new frontier to be used for the benefit of mankind, individual stories tend to show Sam Gunn confronting a problem, overcoming it by sheer ingenuity (not to mention an occasional bit of bribery or blackmail), and winning the fair lady at the same time as he makes a fortune. Then, in the frame story, we learn how Gunn was once again robbed of his fairly won fortune by the big conglomerates who bend the rules and manipulate the corrupt regulatory agencies to stifle

the honest entrepreneur. We also learn that because of his constant opposition to vested interests, along with his ability to beat them over and over again, Gunn is one of the most hated men in the solar system—to the extent that the reporter finds that her network is reluctant to approve her continued research on a feature about his career.

The original *F&SF* stories, each narrated by a different viewpoint character who met Sam Gunn at some point in the past, are self-contained episodes by design. Naturally enough, they move through his career in roughly chronological order, ending up with the story of how he died. At the same time, the frame story traces Jade's obsession with a character whom those in power would just as soon see forgotten. One of Sam's former lovers kills herself rather than deal with the revelations Jade is unearthing. Others have become virtual hermits, hiding in the far reaches of the solar system. On one level, this is merely a good excuse for Bova to take the reader on a grand tour of the Sun's family, but on another level it creates an aura of mythic dimensions about Sam Gunn. He is a man who spanned a planetary system, incorporating the entire history of space exploration in himself. It is not surprising when we learn, as most readers will have suspected all along, that Gunn is not going to let a little thing like death get in his way.

So the two levels of the fix-up, the individual stories about Sam Gunn and the frame story of Jade's search for the truth about his career, are essentially parallel illus-

trations of how a tough maverick with enough imagination and fighting spirit can, with a level playing field, beat the big boys at their own game. The natural enemies of a Sam Gunn or Jade are the regulators who tilt the field as much as the monopolists who shut the door to new blood. It's an ancient and honorable parable—Heinlein called it "The Little Tailor"—entertainingly retold by a leading exponent of nuts-and-bolts near future SF.

As a former editor of *Analog* and a space program insider, Bova can do nuts-and-bolts SF with the best of them. He is an old hand at getting his characters into troubles from which they are extracted by clever use of technology. Bova portrays the little details of life in orbit, on the Moon, at L-5, on ships on long journeys out to the asteroid belt and back, with remarkable ease and authority. And while SF's predictive function is mostly mythical, a lot of what Bova says about life in space has a good chance of turning out right, given what we currently know about the solar system.

And, of course, Bova gets in a few jabs at the bureaucrats and bleeding hearts, who want to rein in the free spirits of the frontier age. He usually manages to maintain a sense of humor and a good-natured tone, however stupid or corrupt the target. Putting the environmentalist arguments against space exploration into the mouth of an airheaded actress, after simplifying them to match her intellectual capacities, strikes me as a cheap shot. But on the whole, Bova is more interested in yarn-spin-

ning than in trashing the opposition.

Sam Gunn gives us a good close look at a "lived-in" future, one big enough for such grand gestures as a sculptor who carves whole asteroids. We see the expansion of the human presence in space from primitive beginnings based on technology we can expect to see within the decade, through permanent moon settlements and sophisticated ships following long orbits out to the asteroid mines. The era of affordable, routine space travel may not be as close as Bova's stories suggest, but if you want to know what it will look like, and what we can accomplish with it when it does become a reality, then *Sam Gunn* is a good starting point.

Human nature in Bova's future is much as it has always been; there is always somebody willing to bend the rules or cut a deal if there's something in it for them, and the people who run things still believe in the golden rule (the one with the gold makes the rules). But just when everything seems hopeless, the human race throws up a maverick like Sam Gunn, who makes us smile even as he makes a billion dollars and runs off with the pretty girl. We know he'll lose them both, before the next adventure, and come back grinning, looking for more.

The Case of the Toxic Spell Dump

By Harry Turtledove

Baen, \$5.99

Readers who hanker after the kind of "fantasy with rivets" that John W. Campbell published in *Unknown* should look up Harry Turtledove's new one. The book

takes place in a world roughly contemporary with ours, but with magic taking the place of technology. All religions are basically true and effective—as is proven by the active roles their deities play in everyday life.

The narrator is David Fisher, an inspector for the EPA—the Environmental Perfection Agency—which looks after the balance of supernatural powers. Fisher is stationed in Angels City, i.e., Los Angeles—Turtledove has plenty of fun coming up with variant California place names, mostly based on literally translating the Spanish names. The story begins when Fisher gets an early-morning call from a high government official, telling him of suspected magical contamination in the vicinity of a spell dump. Typically, the caller can't keep track of time zones, and has no idea how big A.C. really is. But the report is serious enough, and the official highly enough placed, that Fisher takes the long trip up north to investigate.

Of course, the reported trouble is real, and it gets bigger, until Fisher and his allies have to summon extraordinary powers to escape disaster and destruction. The plot is essentially a detective story, and it works reasonably well on that level. But for most readers, the real attraction will be Turtledove's ability to take almost every fantasy cliché you can think of and get a laugh out of it. If all this sounds like a cross between Esther Friesner's *Harpy High* and Heinlein's *Magic, Inc.*, you're getting the right idea.

Turtledove's Angels City may be the ultimate multicultural fantasy

setting. Religious diversity is the order of the day: David Fisher is an observant Jew, but he moves through a world in which all beliefs seem equally valid. The search for the agency behind the toxic spell leaks leads him to investigate magic drawn from Persian, Hindu, Aztec, and a variety of other mythologies. His supervisor keeps handing him such assignments as a study of whether an immigration of leprechauns would unbalance the thecolology of Angels City, or whether the gods of the aboriginal Chumash Indians retain any power in modern times.

A great deal of the fun comes from the substitution of magical devices for the everyday technology in modern life. Radios have minisingers instead of loudspeakers; commuters jam the roads with magic carpets; horological demons power watches; and the outskirts of town are full of small businesses harnessing magic for the most mundane purposes imaginable. Fisher uses the most modern spell checker on the market, and is a pioneer in using virtuous reality technology in his investigations.

But magic can be hazardous to the public welfare, as well: the old gods and demigods were sometimes evil and greedy, and even now their submission to human spells and regulation is grudging at best. There have been a couple of Sorcerous World Wars, the last of which saw the use of city-destroying megasalamanders. The old Aztec pantheon is especially dangerous, and its center of influence is not far from Angels City.

While Turtledove has had his greatest success to date with more serious work such as *Guns of the South*, the appeal of this one is

hard to ignore. David Fisher is a thoroughly likeable character living in a highly entertaining fantasy world—it would be nice to see another book or two about him. The author's wit, his broad sympathy for his characters, his easy use of an enormous grab-bag of mythological allusions, and especially the wacky logic underlying his comic inventions, all make *The Case of the Toxic Spell Dump* a magical mystery tour-de-force. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The European spring con(vention) season wraps up with April. A lull week, then the runup to Memorial Day. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons.

APRIL 1994

28-11 May—**SF Week**. For info, write: Rhone-Alpes, SF, 12 ave. de Paris, Roanne F-42334, France. Or phone (in US): (703) 273-3297 (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Roanne, France (if city omitted, same as in address) at many venues. Guests will include: none announced at press.

29-2 May—**Italy Nat'l. Con.** (0541) 786-382 or (59) 315-579. San Marino. Asimov remembered.

30-1 May—**BeNeLuxCon.** (014) 26-14-45. Rubenianum House, Antwerp, Belgium. Watson, Stableford.

30-3 May—**UK Nat'l. Star Trek Con.** Pontins Middleton Tower Holiday Centre (camp), Morecambe.

MAY 1994

7—**The Gillikins of Oz Convention.** (906) 786-5647. Escanaba MI. For fans of Frank Baum's Oz books.

13-15—**MarCon**, Box 211101, Columbus OH 43221. (614) 451-3154. Hyatt. Farmer, Hambly, Ackerman.

13-15—**ConDuit**, 2566 Blaine Av., Salt Lake City UT 84108. (801) 273-0443. Quality, City Center.

13-15—**Oasis**, Box 940922, Maitland FL 32974. Hilton North, Orlando FL. (904) 788-6727. R. Feist.

13-15—**Kubla Khan**, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402. Club House Inn. A. Budrys.

13-15—**CanCon**, Box 5752, Merivale Depot, Nepean ON K2C 3M1. Ottawa ON. Stirling. Date tentative.

14—**L. Frank Baum Birthday Celebration**, 1004 Tuscarora Rd., Chittenango NY 13037. (315) 687-6250.

20-22—**Corflu**, 4030 8th St. S., Arlington VA 22204. Crystal Gateway Marriott. For fanzine fans.

20-22—**KeyCon**, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6. Ben Bova, Dave Clement. At the Travelodge East.

20-22—**World SF**, % Hull, 855 S. Harvard Dr., Palatine IL 60067. (608) 991-6009. Barcelona, Spain.

24-31—**Cruise Trek: The Alaska Adventure**, Box 2038, Agoura Hills CA 91376. (818) 597-7570.

27-29—**ConQuest**, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64111. (816) 923-9834. Park Place Hotel. S. Brust.

27-30—**DisClave**, Box 677, Washington DC 20044. Sheraton Premiere, Tysons Corner VA. L. Bujold.

27-30—**BayCon**, Box 10367, San Jose CA 95157. (415) 968-7919. Red Lion Hotel. Duane, Sternbach.

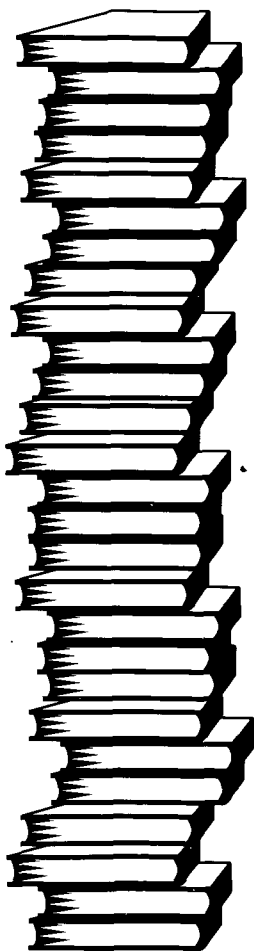
27-30—**MediaWestCon**, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing MI 48906. (517) 372-0738. Holiday Inn S. Zine fans.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian**, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-9494. WorldCon. \$125/C\$165 to 7/15/94.

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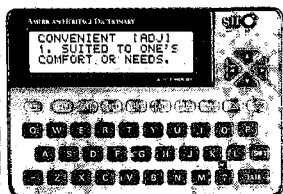
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